This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

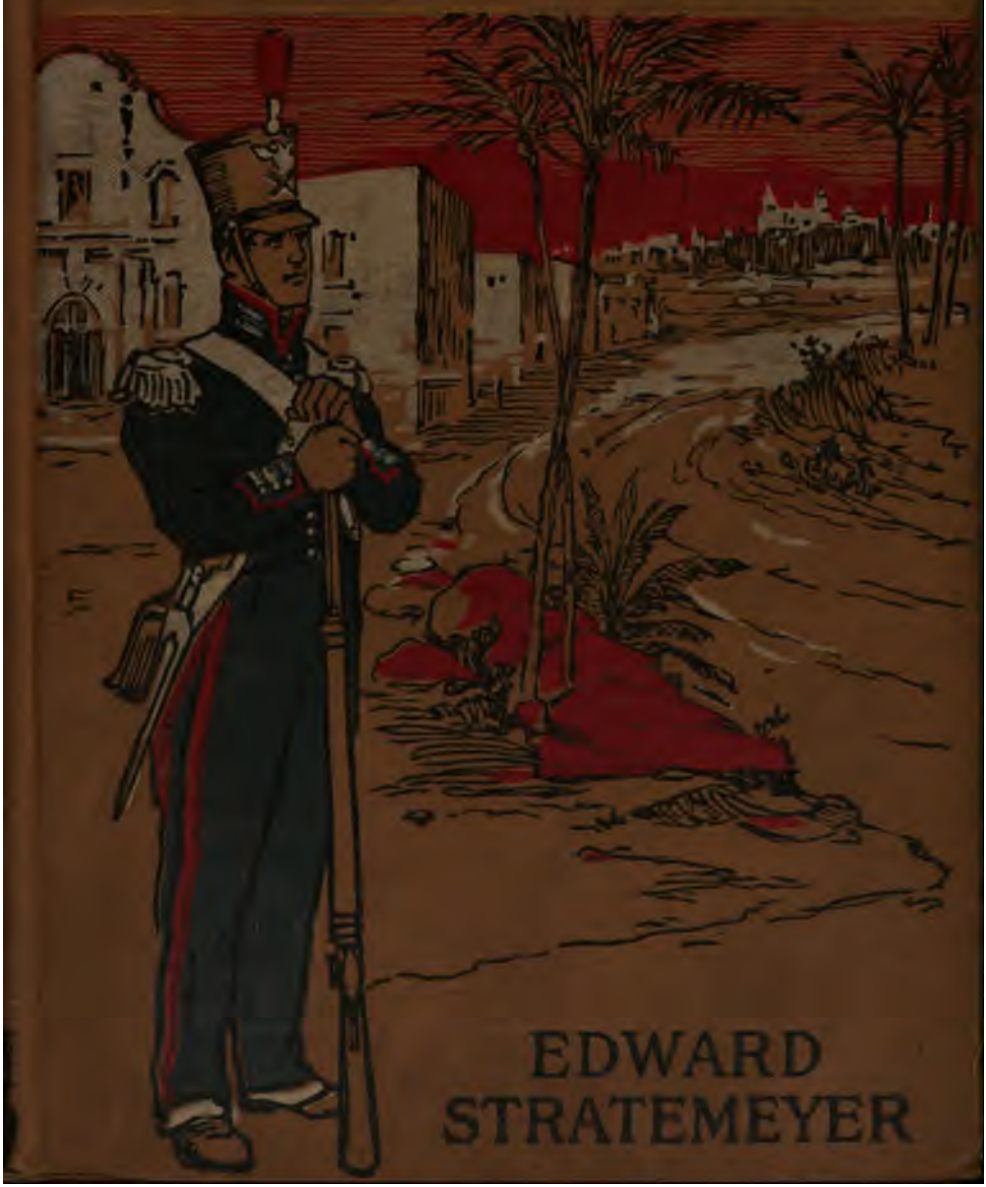
+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 3433 04408 7025
C 12-4952
Stratemeyer, Edward
Under Scott in Mexico



EDWARD STRATEMEYER

COLUMBUS MEMORIAL
LIBRARY
CITY OF WASHINGTON

UNDER SCOTT IN MEXICO

EDWARD STRATEMEYER'S BOOKS

Old Glory Series

Six Volumes. Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $1.25.

UNDER DEWEY AT MANILA.
A YOUNG VOLUNTEER IN CUBA.
FIGHTING IN CUBAN WATERS.
UNDER OTIS IN THE PHILIPPINES.
THE CAMPAIGN OF THE JUNGLE.
UNDER MacARTHUR IN LUZON.

Soldiers of Fortune Series

Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $1.25.

ON TO PEKIN.
UNDER THE MIKADO'S FLAG.
AT THE FALL OF PORT ARTHUR.
WITH TOGO FOR JAPAN.

Colonial Series

Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $1.25.

WITH WASHINGTON IN THE WEST.
MARCHING ON NIAGARA.
AT THE FALL OF MONTREAL.
THE FORT IN THE WILDERNESS.
ON THE TRAIL OF PONTIAC.
TRAIL AND TRADING POST.

Mexican War Series

Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $1.25.

FOR THE LIBERTY OF TEXAS.
WITH TAYLOR ON THE RIO GRANDE.
UNDER SCOTT IN MEXICO.

Pan-American Series

Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $1.25.

LOST ON THE ORINOCO.
THE YOUNG VOLCANO EXPLORERS.
YOUNG EXPLORERS OF THE ISTHMUS.
YOUNG EXPLORERS OF THE AMAZON.
TREASURE SEEKERS OF THE ANDES.

Dave Porter Series

Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $1.25.

DAVE PORTER AT OAK HALL.
DAVE PORTER IN THE SOUTH SEAS.
DAVE PORTER'S RETURN TO SCHOOL.
DAVE PORTER IN THE FAR NORTH.
DAVE PORTER AND HIS CLASSMATES.

Lakeport Series

Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $1.25.

THE GUN CLUB BOYS OF LAKEPORT.
THE BASEBALL BOYS OF LAKEPORT.
THE BOAT CLUB BOYS OF LAKEPORT.
THE FOOT BALL BOYS OF LAKEPORT.

American Boys' Biographical Series

Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $1.25.

AMERICAN BOYS' LIFE OF WILLIAM McKINLEY.
AMERICAN BOYS' LIFE OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

Stratemeyer Popular Series

Twelve Volumes. Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume $0.75.

TWO YOUNG LUMBERMEN. *Price* $1.25.
BETWEEN BOER AND BRITON. *Price* $1.25.
DEFENDING HIS FLAG. *Price* $1.50.

"UP WENT DAN TO THE TOP, WITH POKE NOT FAR BELOW HIM"

Mexican War Series

UNDER SCOTT IN MEXICO

BY

EDWARD STRATEMEYER

Author of "For the Liberty of Texas," "With Taylor on the Rio Grande," "Dave Porter Series," "Old Glory Series," "Pan-American Series," "Lakeport Series," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY J. J. MORA

COLUMBUS MEMORIAL LIBRARY CITY OF WASHINGTON

BOSTON
LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

COPYRIGHT, 1902, BY DANA ESTES & COMPANY

COPYRIGHT, 1909, BY LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

All Rights Reserved

UNDER SCOTT IN MEXICO

Set up and Electrotyped by COLONIAL PRESS, BOSTON

Printed by BERWICK & SMITH CO., NORWOOD

PZ
7
.S88
.U6

PREFACE

"UNDER Scott in Mexico" is a complete story in itself, but forms the third and last volume of a line known under the general title of the "Mexican War Series."

In the first volume, entitled "For the Liberty of Texas," we followed the adventures of the Radbury boys, Dan and Ralph, and their father and friends through the exciting and adventurous days when the Lone Star State proclaimed its independence and fought for that independence against its mother country, Mexico.

It was not long after this that Texas joined the United States. The feeling in Mexico was very bitter, and a dispute over the southern boundary line of Texas soon brought on a war which, at this latter day, seems hardly justified, but which was, nevertheless, fought with valor upon both sides. The real opening of the contest was along the Rio Grande River, and in the second volume of our series, called "Under Taylor on the Rio Grande," were given details of General Taylor's campaign

15733

along the river, at Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, Matamoras, the storming of Monterey, and the never-to-be-forgotten victory at Buena Vista, — which was one of the means of elevating this excellent commander to the Presidency of our country.

The government at Washington now planned a decisive blow. This was nothing less than the sending of a large army to land at Vera Cruz and march directly upon the City of Mexico, the capital. Many of the soldiers under General Taylor were transferred to General Scott's command, including the Radburys and their faithful old frontier friend, Poke Stover; and in this volume we follow their fortunes through the bombardment and capture of Vera Cruz, the taking of the strongly fortified and almost impassable mountain pass, Cerro Gordo, the capture of Puebla, and other engagements leading up to the glorious storming of the heights of Chapultepec and the downfall of the Mexican stronghold.

In bringing this series to a close the author cannot refrain from uttering a word of thanks to the many young people who have received the former volumes with such apparent favor.

EDWARD STRATEMEYER.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	INTRODUCING DAN AND RALPH	11
II.	OUT ON THE RIVER	21
III.	POKE STOVER TO THE RESCUE	31
IV.	SOMETHING ABOUT JUAN THE GIANT	41
V.	THE OLD MEXICAN WOMAN	50
VI.	A BRUSH WITH THE ENEMY	60
VII.	THE CASTLE IN THE MOUNTAINS	70
VIII.	DAN AMONG THE CACTI	79
IX.	ORDERED FORWARD	88
X.	GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT	98
XI.	AN ENEMY ON SHIPBOARD	107
XII.	LANDING AT VERA CRUZ	116
XIII.	RALPH'S HIDING-PLACE	125
XIV.	AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION	134
XV.	CLOSE QUARTERS	143
XVI.	DAN'S UNUSUAL EXPERIENCE	153
XVII.	IN THE GUARD-TENT	162
XVIII.	POKE PLAYS THE SPY	170
XIX.	THE RESULT OF CANNON FIRE	178
XX.	A HEARING BEFORE GENERAL SCOTT	186
XXI.	DAN'S QUICK MOVE	195
XXII.	IN THE STREETS OF VERA CRUZ	203
XXIII.	DWIGHT PELLINGHAM'S CONFESSION	212
XXIV.	THE HUMAN MELONS	221
XXV.	BACK TO THE RANKS	230

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXVI.	THE BATTLE OF CERRO GORDO . .	238
XXVII.	MARCHING THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS	247
XXVIII.	IN WHICH A DESERTER FALLS . .	255
XXIX.	LAST BATTLES OF THE CAMPAIGN .	265
XXX.	THE FALL OF THE CITY — CONCLUSION	275

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

"UP WENT DAN TO THE TOP, WITH POKE NOT FAR BELOW HIM" . . . . . *Frontispiece*

"THE MEXICAN OFFICER . . . FLOURISHED A PISTOL UNDER HIS VERY NOSE TO EMPHASIZE THE COMMAND" 68

"THE HORSE SEEMED TO BE GLAD TO MEET A HUMAN BEING, AND DID NOT ATTEMPT TO RUN AWAY" 86

"THE VAQUERO . . . LEAPED ON THE ANIMAL'S BACK, AND RODE OFF" 135

"'SIT STILL, SEÑOR'" 137

POKE'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE MEXICAN HORNETS 180

"THEY DARTED INTO THE OPEN DOORWAY" . 213

JUAN THE GIANT AND TOLETTO CAPTURED . . 282

UNDER SCOTT IN MEXICO

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCING DAN AND RALPH

"It looks like a heavy storm to me, Dan."

"I shouldn't wonder if you were right, Ralph. It's been blowing up for several days, and we know by former experience what a heavy blow along the Rio Grande means. It will uproot a few trees, even if it's no worse."

"It's a pity we missed the road the rest of the soldiers took."

"Pooh! that's of no consequence. They can't be far off, and besides we know the way down to Matamoras well enough. Only I do wish Poke Stover was with us, — he's always such good company."

"Poke was sent off early in the morning on a special errand — something about the supply-

wagons. General Scott sent word that they must get down to the boats without delay. I reckon the general is in a hurry to strike Vera Cruz, or some other point along the coast."

"He's going to strike for the City of Mexico itself," returned the older of the two Radbury boys — if Dan, with his advancing years, can still be called a boy. "He knows that General Taylor has struck terror to the Mexican heart by his brilliant victories in this section of the country, and there is nothing like going after the enemy when you have him on the run, as the saying goes."

"That's true. But if he strikes at Vera Cruz I don't believe he'll have any walkover. Captain Bardock once told me that that place was very well fortified, and had a fortified island just in front of it."

"I reckon we'd better leave the conduct of the coming campaign to General Scott, Ralph." Dan gave a short laugh. "We're nothing but common soldiers, you know, just here to do our duty, as we may be ordered to do it. But I am just a bit curious to know if we'll see such thrilling times as we did during our last campaign. My! but we had lots of up and downs, didn't we?"

"Do you think we'll ever see anything of that Juan the Giant again?"

"I hope we do — and capture him, too. It isn't safe to allow such a rascal his liberty. I'll never forget how he treated you and me."

"Nor will I." There was a pause for several minutes, during which the two young soldiers picked their way along the river trail. "It's beginning to rain already. My! what big drops! We'll have to get under shelter or we'll be wet to the skin."

"Right you are. Yonder is a clump of low-spreading trees. That will shelter us nicely. Come!" And side by side the pair hurried for the spot indicated. By the time the trees were gained the rain was pouring down in torrents.

While the two young soldiers are awaiting the letting-up of the downpour, let us, for the benefit of those who have not read the two former volumes of this series, take a brief glimpse of the past and learn how it came that they were travelling down the Rio Grande River at this moment, on their way to join the transports of General Scott lying off-shore in the Gulf of Mexico.

Dan and Ralph Radbury were the only sons of Amos Radbury, a widower who had emigrated to Texas years before, when that vast territory still formed a portion of Mexican soil. Dan, who was now in his twenties, was the older of the pair,

while Ralph, his dearly beloved brother, was six years his junior.

Settling down in Texas at that time, when the country was overrun with treacherous Indians, Mexican horse thieves, and desperadoes from everywhere, had been no easy matter, and in the first volume of the series, entitled "For the Liberty of Texas," I have told of many of the trials which the Radburys encountered, and what they and their faithful old frontier friend, Poke Stover, the Missourian, had to do in order to obtain and hold their rights. This was at the time when Texas struck for liberty, and in the perilous battles to follow our friends went to the front and did their duty to the best of their ability.

The freedom of the Lone Star State having been assured, a season of comparative peace followed, and the boys went back to their ranch home, there to till the soil and raise cattle as before. Amos Radbury had been wounded at the battle of San Jacinto, and in those days could do but little, so the management of the place fell largely upon Dan's shoulders, with the ever-faithful Poke Stover close at hand to give aid when needed.

As most of my young readers must know, Texas did not remain an independent State long. She applied for admission into our own glorious Union,

and so came under the protection of the stars and stripes.

The bitter feeling between the Texans and Mexicans was increased by Texas joining the United States, and it was not long before a quarrel arose concerning the southern boundary of Texas, Mexico claiming the Nueces River should mark the dividing-line, and Texas claiming the territory to the Rio Grande River, about a hundred and twenty-five miles farther south. This brought on the war between the United States and Mexico, and in the second volume of the series, entitled "With Taylor on the Rio Grande," I related how Dan and Ralph, along with Poke and other friends, joined the army, to participate in the battles of Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, Matamoras, Monterey, and other struggles of less note, leading up to the final triumph that gave to General Taylor so much of honor that it was the ultimate means of placing him in the Presidential chair.

The fall of Monterey brought a short period of rest to Dan, Ralph, and Poke Stover, and the rest was well deserved. The young soldiers had with them the son of a neighbor, Oliver Fielding, whose eyesight had been injured in one of the battles. They did their best for Ollie, as they called him, until Mr. Fielding came down from his ranch,

procured Oliver's discharge from the army, and took his son home.

While with the army under General Taylor, adventures in plenty had come to both Dan and Ralph, not the least of which was a brush with one Juan Badillo, better known as Juan the Giant because of his height, an old-time horse thief and general all-around rascal, who had at one time and another given the Radburys and their neighbors a good deal of trouble. The last time Ralph and Oliver Fielding had met Juan, the giant had got the best of them and robbed them of all they possessed. Dan had later on encountered the thief, but, although the young soldier prevented Badillo from committing another robbery during the attack on the city of Monterey, he was unable to capture the fellow. Juan the Giant was now at large, and what had become of him nobody knew.

With the fall of Monterey Mexico received an almost fatal blow, but the United States authorities realized that much had still to be done ere the enemy could be brought to total submission. At this time the Mexican government was having something of a revolution within itself, and General Scott, knowing that the time to strike was when the enemy was in a "mix-up" regarding what it had best do, determined to march upon the capital

of Mexico without further delay. Accordingly he ordered a part of the army under General Taylor to join his own forces, now on transports and warships lying in the Gulf of Mexico near the mouth of the Rio Grande. Once these soldiers had joined him, he intended to strike a blow at Vera Cruz, on the gulf shore, and due east from Mexico City. He felt sure that he could capture Vera Cruz by a vigorous bombardment, and this accomplished, he intended to push westward persistently and vigorously.

From Monterey the commands to which Dan, Ralph, and Poke Stover belonged had taken their way down the San Juan River to the Rio Grande. It was still early in the year 1847, and the weather was anything but settled. There would be a few days of fair weather, and then either a heavy rainstorm, or a screaming "norther" which would chill the soldiers to the very marrow of their bones. Provisions were not over plentiful, and it must be confessed that the march toward the gulf was anything but comfortable. But Dan and Ralph had been through too many hardships to grumble, and they took things as they came and made the best of them.

Up to the day on which our tale opens they had been with the others of their commands, but early

in the morning they had been detailed to perform certain work along the river bank. This had taken them from the sight of the other soldiers, and, though the work was done, they had as yet not taken the trouble to rejoin the troops. As Dan had said, both knew the trail down to Matamoras, and it was something of a relief to each to get out of the ranks and from under the eyes of their superiors. They knew that at the most the other soldiers could not be over a mile away from them.

On the journey down the river bank the evidences of war had been visible upon every hand, in the shape of burnt down ranches, abandoned plantations, and the skeletons of innumerable cattle slaughtered for food. Once they had visited a little hut on the river bank, and there found the remains of two Mexican soldiers who, being wounded, had crawled to the shelter to die. It was a truly harrowing sight, and it even now made Ralph shiver as he recalled it.

"What's the matter, do you feel cold?" asked Dan.

"Not particularly, although the wind is rising. I was thinking of that sight in the hut."

"Ugh! that was enough to give a fellow the nightmare, wasn't it? What an awful way to

die — without a person at hand to give you even a drink of water. And I suppose they were just as brave and loyal to their country as any of our soldiers are to our country. War is a fearful thing, when you stop to think about it. I'll be glad when it's all over and we can go back to the ranch."

"We ought to get a letter from home by to-morrow or the day after," returned Ralph, glad to change the subject. "I am anxious to know how father is feeling and how Ollie's eyes are getting along. It would be awful if Ollie should go blind after all. The surgeon said his eyes were a little worse when he left."

"That was because he took the bandages off too quick. He was to keep them on for two or three weeks after he got home. Gracious! listen to that wind! We are going to have a norther with this rain, and no mistake. Come around to the other side of the trees. The wind is driving the rain right in here."

"If it's a norther it will last for the rest of the day and all night, Dan. We'll get wet and be frozen almost stiff. I wish there was some kind of a house or hut handy."

"So do I, but there isn't, and grumbling won't help matters. We might — "

Dan broke off short and straightened up, at the same time putting his hand behind his ear.

"What did you hear?" demanded his brother.

"It sounded like a cry for help. Listen. There it is again!"

"I hear it!" exclaimed Ralph. "It sounds like a woman's voice, too. She's in some sort of trouble."

"The cry came from the river, Ralph. I'm going to see what it means."

And unmindful of the torrent of rain still descending, Dan dashed forth in the direction of the stream, and Ralph followed.

CHAPTER II.

OUT ON THE RIVER

WITH the coming of the rain and the rising wind, the sky had darkened greatly, so the two young soldiers could see but little as they darted through the grass and mesquite bushes in the direction where the swollen Rio Grande rushed onward toward the gulf.

"Are you sure of the direction?" questioned Ralph. "This howling wind may deceive you."

"I think I'm right, but we can make sure," replied his brother, and came to a halt while yet only half the distance to the river had been covered. "Hark!"

"There is the cry again!" ejaculated Ralph, a moment later. "You were right. It sounds like a young woman who is calling."

On they darted once more, through a spot where the bushes were so thick they frequently caught fast, and their clothing sustained more

than one rent. But they did not think of torn clothing just then. Some one was in dire distress, — a female, — and they meant to do what they could to relieve her. They had seen many situations of peril since going to war, and they realized that help must at times be given quickly or it is no help at all.

At last they came in sight of the muddy and swollen stream, at a point where the Rio Grande made a turn eastward. Here were a series of rough rocks, and beyond it a muddy flat and a creek flowing southward. On the creek was an old mill which seemed to be deserted.

"Do you think the cry came from the mill?" questioned Ralph, as he and his brother stopped again in perplexity.

"Perhaps. We might see. The woman —"

Dan ceased speaking, for again the cry reached them, but this time in a gasping voice, as though the caller was fast losing her strength. The sound came from the river proper, and, without waiting, the two young soldiers leaped in that direction, over the rocks and out on the muddy flat, where the rain had caused the water to rise to a depth of several inches.

"I see her!" cried Ralph, straining his eyes ahead. "She is out there on a log or an over-

turned boat." He raised his voice. "Hullo, there!" he yelled.

"Oh, help me!" came back with a gasp. "Help me, please! I — I cannot — hold — on much longer!"

"I'm going to swim out to her," came in quick tones from Dan, and as he spoke he threw off his soldier cap and his coat. "Got that lasso you picked up this morning?"

"Yes."

"Then give me one end and I'll put it up under my arms. There, that's it. Now play out as I need it, and don't haul in till I tell you."

Ralph understood, and no more was said. Running out to the edge of the muddy flat, Dan leaped boldly into the turbulent stream and struck out with strong arms for the floating girl.

It was not long before he saw that she was clinging to an old and worn-out log canoe, a craft which a sharp blow on the rocks had almost split in twain. Evidently she could not swim, or her situation would not have filled her with such terror.

"Keep up, I am coming!" he called, as he approached.

But she continued to scream, and while he was still half a dozen yards away she suddenly disappeared from view.

"Hullo, what does this mean?" Dan asked himself. "She sank quickly and no mistake."

The thought had scarcely crossed his mind when he felt something touch one of his legs. It was a heavy rope attached to some object floating under water, and in a twinkle the rope wound itself about his ankle, and he, too, was carried under.

It was now too dark for Ralph to see the girl, even had she been on the surface, but so far the younger Radbury had watched his brother with close interest. He gave a shout of alarm as he saw Dan go under and fail to reappear.

"Dan! Dan!" he shouted. "Dan, what's the trouble?"

No answer coming back, he essayed to pull in on the lasso. Soon this grew taut, and he could not haul in another foot, although he knew that there still remained at least thirty feet out.

"Something is wrong, that's as sure as the nose on my face," he mused, dismally. "Dan wouldn't stay under so long for nothing."

In an agony of mind he waited a few seconds longer. Then, unable to endure the mental torture, he fastened the end of the lariat to a near-by stump of a tree and plunged over the muddy flat. In his pocket he had a good jack-knife and this he now drew and opened.

The rain continued to come down in torrents, and the wild norther which was rising moaned dismally through the forest back of the river and caused him to shiver as with a chill. Then, as he thought of the possibility of his brother drowning, he gave another shiver which shook him from head to foot.

"I must do something — I simply must!" he told himself, but what to do was by no means clear in his mind. With his jack-knife in his teeth, and his left hand running along the tightly stretched lariat, he soon gained the edge of the muddy flat. His foot slipped and into the river he plunged and began to swim forward with one hand.

He had not gone far before he discovered what was at least partly responsible for the state of the situation. A tree, growing on the edge of the flat, had been hurled down by some former storm and now lay on the river bottom, with numerous branches sticking toward the surface. Dan and the lariat had caught in one of these branches, and the girl and the wrecked dugout had caught in another. The strong current had turned the immense tree partly over, and this had carried girl and young soldier under.

Still clinging to the lariat, Ralph presently reached one of the tree branches. As he did so,

he felt a movement below and touched somebody's arm working convulsively. It was Dan, who was trying his best to get himself out of a tangle.

Without hesitation, Ralph dove down. Dan clutched him, and in that embrace Ralph almost dropped the knife he carried between his set lips. But now he caught it in his hand and with a quick movement slashed away at the lariat and cut it in two.

The instant he felt himself free Dan arose to the surface. His breath was almost gone and he could do little but gasp when he reached the air. The sunken tree had now taken another turn, exposing a heavy branch. To this Dan climbed and clung fast, and here Ralph joined him.

"Dan, are you all right?"

"I — I reckon so," was the gasped-out reply. "The — the tree played me a trick, didn't it?"

"Yes. I didn't see any tree at first."

"Nor I. Where's the girl?"

"I don't know. She —"

Another cry for help reached their ears. The girl had suddenly appeared at the end of another tree branch, ten feet away. Ralph made a dive for her and caught her by the arm.

"Oh, save me! Please save me!" she moaned, in English, but with a strong Spanish accent.

"We'll do what we can," answered Ralph. "Come with me. That other branch is larger than this."

She was too exhausted to do more for herself, and as Ralph caught her in his arms she fainted dead away. Her weight was heavy for him, and it was all he could do to get back to where he had left Dan.

The heavy rain was causing the river to rise, and as the three rested on the large branch both Dan and Ralph felt a sudden tremor along shore.

"The tree roots are breaking!" ejaculated Ralph, and scarcely had he spoken when the tree gave a sudden lurch and a shiver, and then started to float out into midstream.

"Oh!" groaned Dan. "We're leaving shore! We must get off!"

But he was too weak to make a move, and with the girl in his arms Ralph could do nothing. The tree branch came up a little higher out of the water, so that only their lower limbs remained below. On and on they swept, they knew not to where, the darkness increasing rapidly and the rain coming down as furiously as ever. The norther swept directly down the river, and this increased the speed at which the tree was travelling.

"We're in a pickle now for certain," observed Dan, when he had gotten back part of his wind. "We'll have to stay on this tree until it catches fast somewhere, and if it doesn't catch fast it may carry us right out into the Gulf of Mexico."

"I can't even see the shore," returned Ralph, straining his eyes.

"There is a light — probably a soldiers' camp. It's gone now." And though both watched eagerly, the light did not reappear.

On and on went the tree, through the rain, wind, and darkness, and for the time being the two young soldiers could think of nothing but how this unexpected adventure would end. The river was now a roaring torrent, and because of the heavy rain it would not be likely to subside for forty-eight hours or longer.

The girl still remained unconscious, and for awhile both Ralph and Dan were afraid that she would not recover. She was about Ralph's age, tall and slender, with a pretty dark face and curly black hair. She was poorly dressed, but otherwise appeared to belong to the upper class of society.

"She isn't dead, is she?" questioned Dan, after several minutes of silence.

"I can't hardly make out," was the slow answer.

A little while after this the girl gave a gasp and opened her eyes.

"Oh!" she murmured. "Sa-save me!"

"You are safe for the present," said Ralph, kindly. But she did not hear, for she had become unconscious again. But this state did not last, and presently she tried to raise herself, staring around in the meanwhile in bewilderment.

"Whe-where are we?" she asked, faintly.

"On the river," said Ralph.

"And you — who are you, pray?"

"Two American soldiers. We were tramping along the river when we heard your cry, and my brother swam out to aid you. Then he caught in this tree and I went out to help him. The tree got loose from shore, and now all of us are floating down the river together."

"And the old boat —"

"I don't know what became of the boat."

"Did you see my uncle?"

"We saw nobody," put in Dan. "Was your uncle with you?"

At this question the girl gave a shiver.

"No, no, not on the river! But he was after me. He tried to catch me."

"Were you running away from him?" asked Ralph, with increasing interest.

"I was."

"May I ask why?"

"Because — because — oh, I cannot tell you. I was afraid of him. He has used me so harshly of late. He was very miserly, and —"

The girl got no further, for at that moment there came a sudden shock. The tree had struck some rocks and now began to turn over, and in a twinkle the young soldiers and the girl they were trying to rescue found themselves in the water again.

CHAPTER III.

POKE STOVER TO THE RESCUE

It was truly a perilous situation, doubly so because all three of the party were weak from battling with the elements, and therefore hardly able to do more for themselves.

As the tree went over, Ralph went down, and the girl went with him. Dan, seeing this, clutched at both, and for several seconds all floundered about helplessly, and scarcely knowing what they were doing. The tree swept around in a semicircle, and at last came to a standstill. With great exertions the young soldiers, holding the girl between them, climbed up to a position partly on the tree, and partly on the rocks which had served to stay its progress.

For fully a minute nobody spoke, but all held tight, gasping for breath. They fully expected the treacherous tree to make another turn and to resume its journey, but nothing of the sort occurred.

"That was a bad one," said Dan, at length. "I was afraid we were all lost."

The girl tried to answer, but could not. With one hand she clutched Ralph's hand, while the other held to Dan's shoulder.

"I can't see a thing," came from the younger Radbury, after a long look around. "Are we near shore or out in midstream?"

"We can't be very far out," said Dan. "If we were this rock wouldn't be here. I think we must be on a mud-flat, although I can't touch bottom."

"Nor I. But it must be a flat, as you say, or otherwise this tree would slip away."

The violence of the downpour was now abating, although it still continued to rain steadily. But night had settled over the region of the Rio Grande, and all about them was as black as a stormy night can be.

"Do you suppose we are anywhere near a settlement?" came from Ralph, after a long wait.

"Nothing like a light in sight," answered his brother. He turned to the girl. "Do you know if there is any settlement near here?"

"I do not know where we are, sir," she made reply. "I entered the boat at the Monovallo plantation. We must be miles below that — perhaps near the village of Los Nonada, as they call

it. But if we are near the village, where are the lights?" And she shrugged her shoulders in despair.

"We've got to do something, that's sure, unless we want to remain here all night," said Dan. "And I can't see that remaining here is going to help us. If the tree moves again, there's no telling where we will fetch up — most likely at the bottom of the gulf."

"Oh, please do not leave me!" pleaded the girl, clutching him tighter than ever.

"We won't leave you," replied Dan. "If we leave we had better go together."

"The tree is moving again!" cried Ralph, in fresh alarm. "Hold to the rocks!"

He had scarcely time to utter the words when all felt the tree give a lurch, as the strong current wrenched it free from the rocks and mud which held it. Then it turned over and sank almost from view.

The two young soldiers went down with the girl between them, and for the moment there was a wild struggle on the part of all to regain the surface. It was Dan who caught hold of a sharp projecting rock, and who at length raised the girl up and then his brother. The water boiled and foamed on every side of them, and although the

rain was letting up, the norther blew harder than ever.

"Oh!" cried the girl, as soon as she could speak. "The tree is gone. What shall we do now?"

"Hold fast to the rocks," returned Dan. "It's our only chance."

"Can either of you see the shore?"

They could not, although they strained their eyes to the utmost. The rocks upon which they had caught were only a few inches above the surface of the river and were hardly large enough for the three to sit upon. But this was far better than nothing, and they clung on with a grip born of despair.

So half an hour passed — a time which to them seemed endless. The river was rising steadily, and now the water frequently flowed entirely over the rocks.

"If the stream gets much higher we'll be swept away!" gasped the girl. She was so exhausted she could not sit up without support, and both Dan and Ralph did what they could to hold her.

"As the rain has let up I don't think the river will rise much higher — at least not very fast," answered Dan, by way of comforting her. He

was as greatly alarmed as any one, but did not wish to show it.

"Look! Look!" exclaimed Ralph. "A light!"

"Where?" came from both Dan and the girl.

"Over yonder. Don't you see it, behind some brushwood? It's gone now."

They watched steadily and presently the light appeared again, this time closer than before. It was a torch and was being waved over a man's head. By it they could see a bit of the river shore, not a hundred feet away.

"Hullo!" yelled Dan. "Help! help!" And Ralph and the girl joined in the cry.

At first they were not heard, but soon the figure with the torch came to a halt, and then the man moved cautiously to the very edge of the river bank.

"Who calls?" he shouted.

"What! Poke Stover! Is that you?" fairly screamed Ralph, as he recognized the voice of their old frontier friend.

"Wall, hang me ef it ain't Ralph!" roared the old frontiersman, in equal astonishment. "What are ye a-doin' out on the river in sech a storm as this?"

"We're shipwrecked — or next door to it," answered Dan. "Can you help us?"

"Wall, I reckon I can make a putty good try at it," was Poke's answer. "Are you and Ralph alone?"

"No, there is a young lady with us!"

"Gee shoo! A lady? Are ye on a rock out thar?"

"Yes."

"Then hold tight till I can git at ye."

The torch was swung around to make it blaze up brighter, and then stuck up in the wet river bank. In common with many old frontiersmen who went to the front in the Mexican War, Poke Stover carried a lasso, and this he now brought into play.

"Catch the leather!" he cried, and threw the lasso with unerring aim at Dan. The end fell over Dan's shoulder and he caught it with ease.

"You had better go first, Ralph," said the older brother. "I'll follow with the lady."

"No, take her first," answered Ralph, gallantly. "Hadn't you better put the rope under her arms?"

This suggestion was followed, and presently Dan and the young lady were making their way to shore as rapidly as the strokes of the young soldier and Poke's pulling on the lasso would permit. They came in safely, and then the lasso was thrown to Ralph.

"Wall, you've been in a putty mess," observed Poke, as he surveyed them by the light of the flickering torch. "Look about as near like drowned rats as could be. How did it happen, and who might the lady be, if I may be so bold as to inquire?" And he tipped his cap and bowed.

"The lady is a stranger to us," said Dan, and he felt himself blushing as he spoke. "We heard her calling for help out on the river and tried to help her, and by doing that both of us got into trouble and were carried down to this point, where we all caught on the rocks."

"I see," said the frontiersman, and looked inquiringly at the girl, as did also the two young soldiers.

"I suppose you would like to know something about me," said the girl, simply, but with a blush. "My name is Inez Morales, and I am an orphan. My grandfather was a Mexican, but I was born and brought up in Missouri.

"Good enough, miss. I'm a Missourian myself," said Poke, and bowed his acknowledgment.

"Then perhaps, sir, you too will help me."

"Ain't I done thet already? Not but what I'm willing to do a heap sight more ef it's necessary."

"I am very, very thankful to all of you for what you have done for me. Now if you will aid me in

getting to the home of a friend of mine I will never forget your kindness."

"Is it near here?" questioned Dan. The girl interested him more than any young lady he had ever met.

"I cannot say how close it is, although it is somewhere in this vicinity. My friend's name is Señor Ramon, and he lives on the Ramon plantation."

"I know the spot," said Poke. "It ain't over quarter of a mile from here. We can take you thar without trouble."

"Oh, thank you!" And now the girl's face lit up for the first time since they had met.

"You said something about your uncle trying to catch you," observed Ralph, curiously.

"Yes, yes, he was after me! Oh, do not let him see me!"

"You said he had been treating you harshly."

"Yes, very harshly. You see I am an orphan, and my uncle, whose name is Jose Toletto, is my guardian, and has been for three years. He compelled me to leave my home in Missouri and come down here, although I did not wish to leave the United States. At first he treated me very well, but after awhile the treatment became worse and worse, until I grew more than afraid of him. He

was very miserly and hardly gave me enough to eat and to wear. He wanted to save all the money my father and mother had left to me."

"That was contemptible," came from Dan. "I don't wonder you resented such treatment."

"I told my uncle what I thought of him, and we had a bitter quarrel. He said he knew what was best and that he wasn't going to let me squander my money. When matters grew worse, I threatened to leave him and go to my friend Señor Ramon and tell my story, and I even hinted at getting a new guardian. At this he grew furious and locked me in my room for three days and nights."

"He must be hard-hearted," put in Ralph, as the girl paused in her narrative.

"Mebbe he's arfter yer money?" suggested Poke, shrewdly.

"I have sometimes thought that," answered Inez. "You see I have no other relatives. If I died he would get the property, which, I have been told, is worth some ten or fifteen thousand dollars, United States money."

"Reckon as how thet would be a big temptation to a miserly man."

"I am afraid so," said Inez, sadly. "My uncle locked me up three times, and the last time, which

was three days ago, he had a rascally looking man call on him, and I am almost sure the two hatched up some plot against me. The look of the strange man — he was a tall, burly fellow — made me shiver all over, and I grew so frightened I couldn't stand it any longer, and when I got the chance I ran away. My uncle followed me to the river, but I slipped him in the darkness and got into the old dugout — and you know the rest."

CHAPTER IV.

SOMETHING ABOUT JUAN THE GIANT

THE two young soldiers listened with deep interest to what Inez Morales had to say. They felt certain she was telling them the exact truth, and both were indignant over the treatment she had received.

"If your uncle is that kind of a man, he ought to be hauled up before the court," said Dan. "But I suppose he knows that Mexican courts don't amount to very much just now, with this war on one hand and with quarrels among political leaders here on the other."

"I fancy you are right, Mr. — I do not know your name."

"To be sure, I forgot. I am Dan Radbury, and this is my brother Ralph. This is our old friend, Poke Stover. We were all in the army under General Taylor, and now we are on our way to join General Scott."

"I see. But you will take me safe to Señor Ramon's plantation first?"

"To be sure," answered Dan, and the others nodded.

"You spoke about a big man coming to see your uncle and plotting against you," came from Ralph. "Did you find out anything about the fellow?"

"Not much, excepting that he had come on from Texas, and that his name was Badillo."

"Badillo!" cried Ralph and Dan, simultaneously.

"It must be the hoss thief, Juan the Giant," observed Poke Stover. "An' if so, the lady did a wise thing in runnin' away, accordin' to my way o' thinkin'."

"You are right she did," said Ralph.

"Then you know this man Badillo?" questioned the girl, and now it was her turn to be astonished.

"Yes, indeed, we know him," replied Dan, bitterly. "We would give a good bit to get hold of him." And he told something of the troubles they had had in the past with the giant, and mentioned the things the rascal had stolen.

"He looked the villain he is," said the girl. "I certainly did well to run away. Perhaps he would have carried me off or murdered me. If I were

to die, my uncle would get the property, and so he could afford to pay this bad man well for his work," and she shivered from head to foot.

"Is Badillo in the neighborhood now?" questioned Dan.

"He was up at my uncle's place about an hour before we met on the river."

"By Jinks! We ought to go after the rascal!" ejaculated Ralph. "I would give three months' pay to capture him."

"I wish he was captured," said Inez. "I shall not feel safe so long as he is around where I am. I am sure now that he and my uncle plotted something dreadful against me."

"In that case your uncle ought to be arrested," said Dan. "But that wouldn't do unless you could really prove something against him."

"What could an American girl do in a Mexican court at this time?" sighed Inez. "No, I will go to Señor Ramon. He was my father's friend, and I am sure he will protect me."

"If he won't, I know what you can do, Miss Morales," said Dan, suddenly. "You can go up to our ranch in Texas till this war is over. I'm sure my father will be glad to give you a home."

"Oh, you are very kind, and I will remember your offer."

While they were talking, the whole party had been moving in the direction of the Ramon plantation, a rich tract of ground fronting a stream running into the Rio Grande. The place had suffered much during the fighting in that vicinity, but the great rambling house and outbuildings still stood intact.

It was well on toward midnight when the plantation was reached. All was silent about the grounds, but, as they entered the gateway, set in the tall chaparral, a dog barked loudly, and soon a Mexican servant appeared with a lantern and a pistol.

"What will you here?" he demanded, in Spanish.

"Do you not know me, Castro?" asked the girl, going forward.

"The saints be with us! Señorita Morales, and at this time of the night!" gasped the servant, almost dropping the lantern in his astonishment.

"Is Señor Ramon home?"

"Yes, and in bed, fast asleep."

"Tell him I would like to see him at once."

"And these soldiers —" The servant hesitated.

"They are my friends, Castro. Two of them saved me from drowning in the river."

"Is it possible! I did not think Yankee soldiers

so brave. Come in, and I will call the master," and the old servant led the way to the wide veranda and into the spacious dwelling.

They had but a few minutes to wait, for Señor Ramon had heard the barking of the dog and the talking, and was already hurrying into his clothing. Soon he came to greet the girl, and to gaze questioningly at the others.

"They are my friends, and they have done me a great service," said Inez, after being embraced by the master of the plantation, who had known her from infancy. And in her simple way she told how she had run away from her uncle, fled to the river, and how Ralph and Dan had first come to her rescue, and of how Poke had assisted all three later on. She was still very weak, and, by the time she had finished, she sank in a chair almost exhausted.

Señor Ramon was alarmed, and instantly called several of the women folks of the plantation, and Inez was made comfortable with dry clothing and something hot to eat and to drink. In the meantime Señor Ramon turned to Dan and the others.

"Being a Mexican, and with a heart beating solely for our cause, I cannot welcome you to my home as three Yankee soldiers," he said. "But, since you have done so much for the daughter of

an old friend, I do welcome you as brave men, and as worthy of my best hospitality. If you will remain overnight, I will do my best to make you comfortable."

At this rather unusual speech the two young soldiers knew hardly what to say. They hesitated, and looked at Poke.

"Wall, thet's rather neatly put," drawled the Missourian. "An' I reckon ye mean the compliment. In return let me say thet, as the friend o' this young lady, we appreciate your offer to let us stay hyer, but, as Yankee soldiers, doin' our best to conquer your hull country, we prefer to go elsewhar to rest. Ain't I right, lads?"

"You are," said Dan, and Ralph nodded. "But we would like to say a few words more before we go," Dan added. "I mean to Miss Morales. We want to find out all we can about that Juan the Giant."

Señor Ramon was evidently annoyed, for he really wanted them to stay, but he merely bowed. Leaving them sitting on the veranda, he went inside, and presently reappeared with the girl, who, in a clean, new gown, looked prettier than ever.

"You are going? I am so sorry!" said Inez, pouting. "I thought I would have the chance of

a long talk in the morning. I — I thought you might help me further."

"If you will permit it, and I can get away from camp, I'll come to-morrow," said Dan. "I thought we might talk to-night, but it is late, and I reckon all of us are dead tired."

"Then I'll look for you, sure," and Inez smiled. Then, as Señor Ramon turned away for a moment, she whispered: "I am sorry he didn't give you a better welcome. You deserve it."

"He is only sticking up for what he thinks is right. I don't blame him for that."

"And you will come back?"

"If I possibly can. You know a soldier's first duty is to obey orders."

"I will trust you, Mr. Radbury."

She held out her hand, and he shook it warmly. Then she shook hands with Ralph and Poke, and, in a minute more, the three soldiers were on their way out of the plantation grounds. All of a sudden she came running after them.

"Oh, I forgot!" she said, hurriedly. "If you should meet my uncle, do not let him know I am alive. I am going to try to remain hidden for the present, and he'll think I was drowned."

"All right, we'll remember that," said Dan, and then she left them once more.

For several minutes they pursued their way in silence, each busy with his own thoughts. Then Poke placed his hand on Dan's shoulder.

"Putty nice gal, eh, Dan?" he drawled.

"Oh — er — why, of course," stammered the young soldier.

"She is a nice girl," said Ralph, and drew a long breath. "I don't see how a man could have the heart to plot against her."

"Her uncle must be a bad one," said Dan. "If he wasn't, he wouldn't stand in with such a rascal as Juan the Giant."

"I only want to lay hands on thet giant," came from Poke. "I'd make him sing putty small, I'll warrant."

"By the way, how did you happen to come down the river, Poke?"

"I was lookin' fer you boys. My job was done an' I knew you must be somewhar in thet region. But I didn't expect to hev to haul ye outer the stream."

"Do you know where our soldiers have gone into camp?"

"Sure, for I came from there. It's about a mile from here."

"Then we can't get there any too quick for me," said Ralph. "I am dead tired, and hungry to boot, and I want to dry off at a fire."

All were equally wet, tired, and hungry, and for the remainder of the journey but little was said. Each was busy with his thoughts. Those of Dan dwelt continually on the face of Inez Morales. He thought her the prettiest girl he had ever seen; and, as said before, Dan could no longer be called a boy, since he was in his twenties, so his thoughts of a pretty face might mean a great deal.

The camp was reached at last, and late as it was, Ralph and Dan reported to the officer who was in charge at that hour. It was no easy matter to get something to eat, but after awhile they were supplied, and as they ate they dried themselves by a roaring camp-fire. Then Dan and Poke went off to their own command, a short distance away, while Ralph sought his tent, close at hand, and lay down, to sleep soundly until called in the morning.

CHAPTER V.

THE OLD MEXICAN WOMAN

"OH, how stiff I am!"

It was Ralph who uttered the words, on arising the next morning. And stiff he was, in every joint, and this condition was not to be wondered at, when one remembers what he had gone through the evening before.

"You came in pretty late last night," observed Dwight Pellingham, one of his tent-mates, a fellow from the north, who had joined the army but a few weeks before. "You kicked me, too, and woke me up."

"I'm sure I didn't mean to kick you, Pellingham," returned Ralph. "But I was so dead tired I hardly knew what I was doing."

"Oh, don't make any excuses," growled Pellingham. "I'm tired of hearing them. Only take care next time, or we'll have a jolly row, mark me!"

Dwight Pellingham was continually getting ready for a "jolly row," as he termed it. He was a very fastidious and conceited young man, and why he had ever joined the army was a mystery to Ralph and a good many of the other volunteers. To tell the truth, Pellingham had had a quarrel with his father, who did not wish to give the young man all the spending money demanded. In a huff Dwight had threatened to run away and become a soldier, and his father had allowed him to do so, satisfied that army discipline was just what his offspring needed.

The few weeks he had been in the ranks had opened the foolish young man's eyes, and it was not long before he bewailed his situation, although in secret, for nobody cared to listen to what he might have to say on the subject. He was set down in camp as a fop, and the soldiers often poked fun at him. This made him sour, and he frequently tried to vent his anger on Ralph and his other tent-mates, and on those who were younger than himself.

"Oh, don't be growling all the time, Pelly, me b'y," came from Tim McManus, another tent-mate, and a young Irishman who was as full of fun as an egg is full of meat. "Sure an' ye'll set me poor head to achin' wid yer fault-findin'. If ye didn't

wisht to put up wid sodger life why didn't ye git a job a-tindin' a windmill or drivin' lambs to pasture?"

"See here, McManus, don't you put your oar in!" roared Pellingham. "Radbury kicked me, and I don't intend to stand it."

"Thin sit down on it — we're not compillin' ye to sthand, are we, Ralphy, me b'y?"

"I didn't mean to kick him," said Ralph.

"I believe you did it on purpose. I'll get square for it, see if I don't!" And thus growling to himself, Dwight Pellingham quitted the tent.

"Sure an' that b'y has the schwelled head," grumbled Tim McManus. "If he don't look out 'twill bust on him some day, an' thin everybody will be afther learnin' 'twas a head without brains. Don't ye be afraid of him, Ralphy."

"I'm not afraid of him, Tim. But I would rather be friends with a tent-mate. He might play a pretty rough joke on a fellow while he slept."

"If he does he'll git it back from yours trooly, Tim McManus, third corporal of Company C, an' wid compound interest," and with an earnest shake of his head, covered with a shock of red hair and a strong red beard, Corporal Tim strode out after Pellingham, and Ralph followed.

Roll-call and breakfast were soon over, and then the soldiers set about cleaning up camp and drying the things which had been soaked by the storm of the evening before. Ralph's duties were not many, and as soon as he was able he hunted up his commander and stated that he would like to get off for the remainder of the day, and explained why.

The officer had heard all about Juan the Giant, and he was quite willing that an effort should be made to catch the rascal.

"You may take some men with you, if you wish," he said. "I think we can spare three or four easily enough."

"Thank you, but I expect my brother and old Poke Stover, the scout, along soon," answered Ralph. "If they come, I don't think it will be necessary to call on any others."

In a short while Dan and Poke appeared, and without delay the three set off in the direction of Señor Ramon's plantation. The night's rest had done everybody a world of good, and the three felt in the best of spirits as they advanced.

On reaching the Ramon plantation, Inez Morales ran down the garden path to meet them. She looked the picture of health and smiled brightly as she shook one and another by the hand.

"I have seen nothing of my uncle or of that Badillo," she said. "I am almost certain my uncle thinks I was drowned in the river."

"In that case he more than likely went back home," said Dan.

"I think so."

"And perhaps Juan the Giant is still with him," put in Ralph.

"Reckon we can't do better nor to git to that plantation without delay," said Poke. "If he thinks the job done, Badillo won't stay in the neighborhood long, especially when he learns that our troops are close by."

Dan would have preferred remaining awhile, to talk to Inez, but he realized the truth of what the others said, and so agreed to move on to the Toletto plantation without delay. Inez described its location minutely, so they would make no mistake in getting to it; and once again they set off, the girl waving them a good luck from the veranda as they turned the corner of the chaparral hedge.

"We may have some trouble handling this Jose Toletto," remarked Dan, as they trudged on. "From what Miss Morales says, he is a sly one."

"I move we investigate the premises on the quiet before we make our presence known," came from his brother.

"Thet's it, Ralph," put in the old frontiersman. "We may learn a heap sight more thet way. If we show ourselves, and Badillo is around, he may git Toletto to hide him away."

Half an hour later they reached a spot Inez had described to them. There was a clump of pecan-trees bordering a small watercourse, and beyond was a broken hedge, marking the limits of the Toletto plantation. In the midst of the plantation stood a half tumbled-down dwelling and several equally dilapidated outbuildings. Nothing was in a state of cultivation, and all showed what our friends had already suspected — that Jose Toletto was as shiftless as he was miserly and cruel.

"Must be a poor critter and no mistake," observed Poke, with a snort. "Too confounded lazy to earn his livin', and expectin' to live off that gal's money."

"Let us creep up behind the barn," said Dan. "I see a good road to follow."

The others agreed, and as silently as foxes after chickens, they crawled along the watercourse and the bushes beyond until they gained the building mentioned. Then they moved to the shelter of a smoke-house, and in a moment more found themselves close beside the dwelling itself.

Not a soul was in sight, but from the kitchen of

the dwelling came the voice of an old Mexican woman, droning a Spanish song. Then the woman appeared, to hang some wash on a near-by line. She was little but a hag, with snags of teeth and hair which fell over her face.

As she turned to reënter the kitchen Dan turned to Ralph and Poke. "Follow me," he whispered, and made after her.

In the kitchen the woman turned to a corner cupboard, to put away some things she had been using. As Dan came in he saw a door open, leading to another room of the house. Tiptoeing his way to the door he closed it. Then, as the old woman turned around, he caught her by the arm, at the same time clapping his hand over her mouth.

"*Silencio!*" he commanded, in Spanish. "*Silencio!*"

This was part of the little Spanish the young soldier could now speak, and the woman understood. She trembled violently, probably thinking the wicked *Americanos* might murder her on the spot.

There was a pause, and Dan dropped the hand which had been placed over her mouth. "Do you speak English?" he asked. "If you do, answer me in a whisper."

The woman trembled and shook her head.

"Kind, good soldiers, do not murder me!" she whined, in Spanish. "I am a poor old woman, I am harmless, I have done nothing; spare me!"

"Where is Jose Toletto?" went on Dan. "Jose Toletto, do you understand that?"

The woman nodded, then shook her head and pointed out of the door and waved her hand toward the road and nodded again.

"She means Toletto is away," said Poke. "You mind her while I sneak through the house and take a look around."

"And I'll watch outside, so that nobody gets away on the sly," put in Ralph.

They separated, and the old frontiersman took a thorough look in every part of the dwelling.

"Not a soul around," he said, when he came back. "See anybody, Ralph?"

"No."

"Then this woman must have been left in charge," said Dan. "I wonder if we can find out from her where Toletto has gone and what has become of Badillo."

As well as they were able they set to work to question the Mexican woman, and by using all the Spanish the three could muster up they at last learned that Toletto had gone off on foot about an hour and a half before, and that Badillo had been

with him. They had gone down a winding road leading to the distant mountains, why the old woman could not tell.

When asked about Inez, the old woman shrugged her shoulders. All she knew was that the girl and her uncle had quarrelled, and the girl had run away and her uncle after her, and Badillo had followed. The men had come back about midnight alone.

"Then Toletto must indeed think Inez dead," said Dan, in a whisper.

"That's so," said Ralph. "But what shall we do now?"

"Let's walk up that mountain road a mile or two," suggested Poke. "We may learn something."

The others were willing, and leaving the old woman wondering what it all meant, they left the dwelling as quickly as they had entered it.

The sun was now up good and strong, consequently the day was anything but cool even though it was early spring. They soon struck the mountain road, which proved to be little better than a cattle trail.

"I reckon this road leads to the village of Paratilli," observed Poke, as they trudged along. "But that's a good six or eight miles from here, at the foot of the hills."

"I suppose this will prove a wild goose chase," said Ralph. "But now we have the day off we may as well make the best of it. I don't believe we'll hear of Badillo again after we embark for Vera Cruz."

"Nor do I," answered his older brother.

On they went, Poke setting the pace and the others having hard work to keep up. The path was now rough, with big rocks in some places and patches of cacti in others.

"Hark!" exclaimed Poke, presently.

A gunshot had sounded out, and this was followed by another, and then all became silent once more. The shots had come from a distance ahead, but they could see nothing.

They waited for awhile and then advanced again, each with his weapon ready for use and each wondering what the two shots had meant.

CHAPTER VI.

A BRUSH WITH THE ENEMY

A FEW minutes later they came in sight of a small cabin, or rather a hut, standing at the rear of a small clearing, with several tall trees overshadowing its back. The hut was in a wretched condition, looking as if it had remained uncared for many years.

"I think the shots came from around here," whispered Dan, as he came to a halt.

"Go slow, the greasers may be in the hut," remarked Poke.

"Hark," put in Ralph. "Did you hear that?"

Before the others could answer, all heard a groan, coming from the interior of the shelter. They waited, and the groan was followed by another, not so loud.

"Somebody is wounded," was Dan's comment, and he moved closer, followed by the others. He gained the doorway of the hut, but all was so dark inside he could see little or nothing.

"Oh, help me!" came in Spanish. "Help me! I am sadly wounded, señor."

"Here's a wounded Mexican," said Dan, and stepped inside. As his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness he saw that the fellow was alone. He was about fifty years of age, poorly dressed, and was suffering from a wound in the breast.

Learning they could speak little Spanish, he addressed them in broken English: "Two men were here, villains," he said, with an effort. "They threatened me, and then shot and robbed me."

"Did you know the men?" questioned Dan.

"I knew one of them. He is called Juan the Giant. We had some dealings years ago, when he cheated me out of the price of a horse. Now I wanted my money and told him so. Then he shot me, while his companion looked on and did nothing to aid me. Then both took a horse I own and rode off with him."

"Where did they go?"

"Along the road that leads to the mountain. Oh, my poor body! I feel as if I were going to die!" and the wounded man gave a gasp.

Dan knelt down beside the sufferer and Poke did the same, the frontiersman cautioning Ralph to remain at the doorway, on guard. A brief

examination was sufficient to show that the Mexican had received a wound likely to prove fatal.

"You're in a bad way," said Poke. "What is your name, and have you any relatives close by?"

"My name is Plassa — Enrique Plassa. I have no relatives nearer than Mexico City. There I have a sister, Stella." The Mexican gave another gasp. "I — I am so weak! I believe I must die. If I do, tell my sister how I died, and try to bring Juan the Giant to justice. I — I had some money — not much — but he robbed me, otherwise my sister could have had that, for she, too, is poor. I — I —"

The Mexican tried to go on, but could not. Then he gasped out the single word, "Water!" but before it could be brought, a rattle sounded in his throat, and he fell back dead.

"He's done for," said Poke, soberly, and Dan had to gulp down a lump in his throat. "And Juan the Giant did the deed. He ought to be shot fer it."

"That's true," said Dan. "What shall we do with him?"

"Let us leave him here for the present. We can notify the Spanish authorities later."

They left the hut, glad to get away from such a painful scene. Dan made a note of the man's

name and that of his sister, wondering if he would ever get the chance to tell the latter personally of what he had seen and heard.

"If Juan the Giant and Toletto rode off on the horse, they must be some distance from here," said Ralph, as they moved on. "And if that is so, the question is, will it pay us to follow on foot?"

"Reckon as how we might go a mile or two farther," answered the old frontiersman. "It's early yet."

"Yes, let us go on. I am anxious to do what we can, to avenge the death of the Mexican as well as for Inez Morales's sake — not to mention our account against the Giant."

They were soon on a portion of the trail which was very rough. Loose rocks were on every side, and they had to pick their way with care, for fear of twisting an ankle or breaking a leg. It was growing hotter, and coming to the top of a rise they paused to cool off and get back their breath.

As they stood there, Dan fanning himself with his cap, a shot rang out, coming from a cliff to their right, and a bullet cut through the head-covering. The sound was so unpleasantly close that Dan dropped flat on the rocks, and the others quickly followed suit.

"My stars! It's a wonder I wasn't struck!" cried the young soldier, as he looked at the bullet-hole. "A pretty close shave, that!"

"Follow me!" cried Poke, and crawled behind a rocky shelter not far away. They were glad enough to do so. As they were disappearing another shot rang out, and the bullet clipped off a bit of stone directly over Ralph's head.

"This is getting interesting," said the younger Radbury, with a shiver. "I'm glad he struck the rock and not my head."

"Do you think the shooter was Juan the Giant, Toletto, or some Mexican soldiers?" asked Dan.

"That's hard to tell," returned Poke, with a shrug of his lean shoulders. "I reckon the soldiers would fire on Americans jest as quick as the Giant would fire on us personally. Ain't no way, as I can see, but fer one of us to go forward and see what it means."

"Shall I go?" questioned Dan, promptly.

"No, you stay here with Ralph, and I'll go."

The young soldiers argued, but the old frontiersman would not listen, and in a moment more Poke Stover was off, crawling around the rocks and into the bushes with the noiselessness of a snake. The two young soldiers sat down in something of a hollow, waiting with their guns across their laps.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. To the waiters it seemed much longer, and they had to consult Dan's watch to make sure that it was not at least an hour. Ralph presently declared he heard talking in the distance, but the sounds, whatever they were, soon died out and were not renewed.

"Poke ought to be coming back soon," said Dan, after consulting the watch for the twelfth time.

"When he comes it will probably be as noiselessly as he went, Dan. He knows our enemies cannot be far — hark!"

They listened. From a distance came rifle-shots, followed by a yelling which lasted several seconds. Then all was silent again.

"I'm going to see what's up," cried Dan. "Poke may be in trouble."

"Then I'm going too."

"No, you stay here. Poke may come back, and if he doesn't find us he'll wonder where we have gone to. If I don't see him I'll soon return. But be on guard."

So speaking Dan threw himself down again and followed the course the old frontiersman had pursued. He was soon out of Ralph's sight, and then the young soldier found himself utterly alone

on the rocky rise, which was hemmed in on all sides by the cliff and still greater hills.

It must be confessed that Ralph felt anything but easy in mind. The silence in itself was oppressive, and perhaps the premonition of danger so close at hand weighed heavily upon him. He turned and looked in every direction, but no human being could be seen. He sighed deeply.

"I must say I'd just as lief be back in camp," he mused, after quarter of an hour had passed. "Poke or Dan ought to be back long ago. It's true we have conquered this part of Mexico, but I reckon these rocky hills are full of guerillas, and they are ten times worse than the regular soldiers, for they'd cut a fellow's throat for a silver dollar. If they don't come soon I really won't know what to think of it."

Another ten minutes went by, each second dragging more heavily than those gone before. A dozen times Ralph got up and walked around the rocks, although taking care not to expose himself to a possible shot from the cliff.

At last he could bear the suspense no longer and resolved to go after Dan. Gun in hand he began to crawl over the rocks until he came to a point where the trail seemed to divide into two parts.

"Which trail did Poke take, and did Dan take the same?" was the question he asked himself. One path ran over the bare rocks, the other into something of a jungle growing at one end of the cliff, which was several hundred feet long. He decided to pursue the latter trail, and soon moved on a distance of a dozen yards.

A sound disturbed him, and he came to a halt, wondering what it meant. He looked around, but could see no one. Had it been a bird flying from one bush to another? He looked closely, but not so much as a single feather showed itself.

"I must be getting nervous and imagining things," he thought, and started to move on again. But he had scarcely taken a dozen steps when he heard the sound again. Then a shadow appeared by his side, and in a twinkle he was caught and forced backward by one person while another caught hold of his gun and twisted it from his grasp.

"*Halte!*" came in Spanish, and he did halt, for there was absolutely nothing else to do. Looking, he found himself in the grasp of two Mexican soldiers, while a lieutenant and several other soldiers stood near.

Under the circumstances it would have been foolhardy for Ralph to continue the unequal con-

test, so he readily made signs that he was willing to submit. As soon as he did this, he was searched for further weapons, and then his hands were bound tightly behind him. He started to talk, but the Mexican officer in charge of the detachment motioned him to be silent, and flourished a pistol under his very nose to emphasize the command.

Without delay the command quitted the spot, taking a trail leading still farther up the mountains. Ralph was burning to ask questions, wanting to know what had become of Dan and Poke. But he could not talk Spanish sufficiently well to make himself understood, and the command to remain silent was not withdrawn. Once he uttered a word and quickly received a slap over the mouth as a warning.

A two hours' tramp followed, taking the helpless young soldier many miles from where he had parted with his brother and his old frontier friend. During the first part of the journey the Mexicans had remained silent and constantly on guard, — for they suspected an American detachment of infantry or cavalry might be near, — but as the mountain fastnesses were approached they became more talkative and chatted quite gaily among themselves.

Coming to him, the Mexican lieutenant began

"THE MEXICAN OFFICER . . . FLOURISHED A PISTOL UNDER HIS VERY NOSE TO EMPHASIZE THE COMMAND"

to question Ralph in Spanish. The young soldier shook his head. "I can't talk Spanish," he said. "Talk English." And at this the lieutenant shrugged his shoulders, lit a cigarette, and said no more to him. Not one of the Mexican soldiers could talk English, so the prisoner remained unquestioned.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CASTLE IN THE MOUNTAINS

RALPH'S heart sank lower and lower as the march was continued farther and farther into the heart of the mountainous region. To what point the Mexican soldiers were bound he could not surmise. At a convenient spot a halt was made for a meal, and he was given some *tortillas* and a drink of coffee. Again he tried to ask questions and again he failed to gain any information.

At last, when he was so tired he could scarcely stand, they came in sight of a valley below them and began the journey downward into this. Here the trail was an easy one. In the valley was a fair-sized stream, both banks of which were lined with trees and bushes.

Presently Ralph caught sight of a large rambling building, built not far away from the bank of the stream. It was of stone, two stories in height, and with a square tower at one corner. That the building was very old could be seen at a

glance, and Ralph rightly guessed that it was an old Spanish castle, dating back to the beginning of the former century.

"I wonder if we'll stop there," he mused. He was not kept long in doubt, for the detachment headed directly for the castle, and soon after entered the ancient courtyard, where they joined two full companies of Mexican regulars. The lieutenant went to report to the *capitan* in command, and meanwhile Ralph was hustled into the building and into a small side room. The room had a heavy door to it, and this was closed and locked, thus making him a close prisoner.

"Well, I'm in a pickle and no mistake," he groaned, as he found himself alone and in the dark. His hands had been loosed and he felt around cautiously. There was a bench in the apartment, and he threw himself down on this, to rest and to ponder over the situation.

His mind was far from easy. What would his captors do with him? Would they treat him as an ordinary prisoner of war, or would they consider him a spy and stand him up to be shot?

"They'll shoot me if they possibly can," he thought. "They hate to bother with prisoners. Perhaps they have already done away with Dan and Poke." Then of a sudden he thought of the

corpse of Enrique Plassa. Had they found that, and did they think he and the others had murdered the poor fellow?

"If they think that they won't have any mercy on me," he sighed. "Oh, if only I could get out of this!"

Having rested himself, he arose and felt carefully around the walls of the room. There was only one slit of a window, several feet in height, but far too narrow to admit the passage of his body. The only door was the one through which he had entered, and this refused to budge.

"Must have been built for a prison cell," he sighed. "Anyway, it's as good as any first-class jail. A fellow couldn't get out of here, no matter how hard he tried."

Slowly night came on and Ralph found himself hungry once more. The room was pitch-dark now, and he laid himself on the bench, to rest if not to sleep.

"They might at least give a fellow a drink of water," he said, and after waiting a bit longer, began to hammer on the door with his fist.

A sentinel appeared, his face dark and angry. But when Ralph pointed to his tongue and said "*Aqua*," the fellow understood and grinned. Then he nodded and locked the door again.

Quarter of an hour later another soldier appeared, bringing with him some bread and meat and a pitcher of water. He had a bright lantern on his arm, which he set down on the bench, so that Ralph might see to eat. The prisoner tried to talk to the Mexican, but the fellow merely shook his head and proceeded to smoke a cigarette in silence.

While eating Ralph gazed around his prison cell, noting every detail. The walls were as solid as his feeling of them had indicated, and the ceiling above was heavily beamed and floored.

Then his gaze strayed to the flooring of the room. In a corner he saw something which caused him to start, but he instantly turned his eyes away, that the eyes of the Mexican guard might not turn in the same direction.

As soon as the meal was over, the guard arose and took up the platter and his lantern, but left the pitcher with the water behind. Ralph pointed to the light, but the Mexican shook his head decidedly. He could not leave the lantern; the prisoner must go to sleep in the dark.

"Well, I suppose you are only obeying orders," said Ralph, and smiled faintly, at which the Mexican grinned. Then, to show his friendliness, the guard offered Ralph a cigarette, and the youth

accepted it with a bow, although he did not smoke. But he took good care the cigarette should be well lit ere the guard took his leave, locking the door as before.

The moment he found himself alone Ralph dropped on his hands and knees. He had seen cracks in the floor which would seem to indicate the presence of a trap-door. By the glow from the cigarette he located the cracks again, and also a small ring, which a leg of the bench had concealed. He pulled on the ring, and with a creak of its rusty hinges the trap came up, revealing a pitch-black hole beneath. Then the cigarette went out, and although Ralph pulled upon it as if he was a veteran smoker, it refused to light up, and he was left again in total darkness.

Should he trust himself in the black hole, in an endeavor to find a way to the outer world? It was a delicate question, for there was no telling how deep the hole was and where it might lead to.

"These ancient castles always have underground passages leading to somewhere," he told himself, "and this must lead to somewhere, too. I'm going to venture it. If I get badly stuck I can yell for help."

With this conclusion, he allowed himself to drop into the hole, which proved to be about twelve

feet deep. At the bottom was a rough slab of rock, partly covered with dust and dirt. There were also three walls of stone; and a passageway running, so he thought, in the direction of the river.

Ralph had not proceeded down the passageway far when his foot slipped in a pool of water and down he went on his back, splashing the water in every direction. He quickly arose and came to a halt, not knowing how deep the water might be.

"Perhaps a part of the river runs in under the castle," he muttered. "If it does, I may have to swim for it before I reach the open air, just as Dan and Poke had to swim for it, when they escaped at the fall of the Alamo." He heaved a sigh. "Wish I knew where Dan and Poke were."

He halted for several minutes, and then, not caring to remain where he was or to go back, advanced into the water, but with caution. The pool proved to be not over a foot deep and scarcely a rod long, and soon he found himself on dry ground again.

The passageway at the start had been several yards wide, but as he proceeded he stumbled on some loose stones and dirt, showing that one of the sides had at some past time partly caved in. He put up his arm and felt the loose dirt and roots over his head.

This gave him a new idea. Could he dig his way upward, by standing on a pile of stones and cutting at the dirt overhead? This might prove a dangerous proceeding, but, if he wanted to escape he must be willing to take some risk.

Feeling on the ground, he found several somewhat flat stones and piled them one on top of the other with care. Then he stood on the pile and found he could touch the dirt above with his head. He felt around and touched the roots of a tree.

"I don't know as it would be safe to dig near these," he mused. "If the tree came down it might squash me flat under it. I had better try some other spot."

As rapidly as he could he shifted his pile of stones. This was no light task, for two of the stones were in weight all that he could lift. Then he began to dig away at a place several yards away from the tree roots.

He was proceeding with caution, for the dirt was apt to come down into his eyes, when a sound in the direction of the castle startled him. Looking down the passageway, he caught the glimmer of a light.

"They have discovered my escape!" he thought, and his heart sank within him. "They are coming after me!"

He leaped from the pile of rocks and started to run, tumbling headlong over a mass of loose dirt and stones not fifty feet farther on. The way now led upward, and soon his hand struck a mass of brushwood.

"I must be getting close to the open air," he murmured. "Oh, if I can only get away!" And he renewed his efforts, pitching headlong half a dozen times, but each time picking himself up quickly. His face and eyes were full of loose dirt and he was more than half blinded.

The voices behind him kept coming nearer, and he heard a shout and saw another glimmer of light. Then, of a sudden, came a fall of earth and rocks somewhere to the rear, and the voices and the light were suddenly shut off from him.

"Something came down, that's certain," he told himself. "Must have been that patch of dirt and rocks I was poking at. Wonder if it came down on top of the Mexicans and buried them?"

He felt compelled to pause, for he was out of breath and the dirt was thick in both eyes. The silence lasted for fully half a minute, and then came a faint murmur, as if coming from the other side of a mass of ground several feet thick.

"The stuff just came down in time to cut them off," he concluded, and this surmise was correct.

"Now I must get away before they can dig through to here, or go back and give the alarm."

And once more he moved onward, through the darkness, bound to get away if such a deed were possible.

CHAPTER VIII.

DAN AMONG THE CACTI

LET us go back to Dan and learn how he fared after leaving Ralph to follow Poke Stover.

Dan knew only too well that the entire party was in a position of extreme peril and that a false move might cause one or another his life. Therefore he crawled over the rocks and around the bushes in the same snake-like fashion the frontiersman had employed.

Soon he came to the split in the trail and here hesitated for a moment. But then a mark of the toe of Poke's boot caught his eyes and told him which path to choose, and again he went ahead.

Several hundred yards were covered when Dan came to a sudden halt. A murmur of voices had reached his ears, followed by a swishing sound, as if something had been flung through the air across the top of some brushwood. Then all became as silent as before.

"Now, what can that mean?" he asked himself, but the question could not be answered.

Once more he moved ahead, but this time with more caution than ever, if such a thing were possible. He was now going down a slight hill, at the foot of which the ground was moist, showing he was in a hollow having no outlet. Here Poke's footsteps could be plainly seen, and encouraged by this he pressed on faster than ever.

Having ascended a small hill, Dan found himself facing a second cliff, one running at almost right angles to the first. Here the ground was hard and full of stones, and he had not progressed far before he ran into a thick bed of cacti, growing to a height of several feet. The thorns of the plants stuck out in all directions, catching on his clothing and giving him more than one severe scratch.

In trying to avoid the worst of the cacti the young soldier unconsciously wandered from the right trail, although he did not realize his mistake until some time later. Moving on and on, expecting to catch sight of Poke at any instant, he went deeper and deeper into the wild growth until, coming to another hollow, he suddenly found himself amid cacti reaching over his head and shutting in the view on every side.

"Hullo! This won't do," he told himself, and

after pausing a minute to rest and get his bearing, started to retrace his steps.

It was then that he discovered how he had missed Poke's trail. Soon he came to a spot where the way forked into three directions, and as this was over a smooth bit of rocky ground, even his own trail could not be discovered. But he went on, thinking to right himself in a moment more. And thus he became hopelessly lost.

Some distant shots made him halt again. He listened for a possible cry from Ralph or Poke, but none came.

He had scarcely taken another step forward when a hiss at his very feet made him leap back in fresh alarm. There on the rocks was a rattlesnake, a reptile all too common in this part of Mexico.

The rattlesnake was ready to strike at Dan, and the young soldier lost no time in leaping into the cacti behind him. In doing this, he landed close to the hole of the reptile, and in a twinkle two other rattlesnakes glided out, rattling ominously.

It must be confessed that Dan was scared, for he knew only too well how poisonous the sting of a rattler is. He made another leap, and then, as two of the snakes advanced, he blazed away with his gun.

His aim was better than he had anticipated, for

the bullet hit one of the reptiles in the head and caught the second in the body directly behind the neck. There was a wild thrashing around, and one of the snakes tried to wind itself about Dan's leg. But he turned and ran, making leaps into the cacti that would have done credit to a frightened deer.

When he at last considered himself out of immediate danger the young soldier found himself more hopelessly lost than ever. His uniform was torn in a dozen places, and both his hands and his face were bleeding from the scratches received.

He reloaded his firearm and gazed around him, and heaved a deep sigh.

"I'm making a first-class mess of it, that's what I'm doing," he murmured. "It would have been much better had I remained with Ralph. Now, I've lost them both, and there's no telling when I will find either of them again."

He took another good look around, — which was not saying much, since the ever-present cacti cut off his vision in almost every direction, — and then started to regain the place where he had left Ralph.

At last he found himself on a small rise of ground. At a great distance he could see the first cliff and the spot where he had left his brother. To his left was a rough series of rocks with a trail running to the southward.

As he gazed at this trail he saw a sight which filled him with surprise. Some Mexican soldiers were filing along, some on horseback and the others on foot. All carried heavy loads which looked as if they might contain ammunition.

"They are removing ammunition on the sly!" he muttered. "I'll wager that is some of the stuff we couldn't locate when General Taylor took possession of Matamoras."

He watched the Mexicans with interest and did not move until a bend in the mountain trail hid them from view.

"I'm glad I didn't fall in with them," he told himself. "They would either have shot me down or made me a prisoner in jig time."

Dan now took his bearings with care, realizing that if he made another mistake he might become hopelessly lost among the cacti. His running and climbing had thoroughly tired him, and the unclouded sun had made him both hot and thirsty. But no water was at hand, and he had to go without a drink, an added hardship.

As he advanced he kept his eyes open for more rattlesnakes, and it was well that he did this, for he had covered less than a hundred yards when he ran into another nest of the reptiles, which this time numbered fully a score.

He had to blaze away a second time, for one of the rattlers, resting on a rock in front of him, flew directly for his face. The snake received the bullet directly into one of those blazing eyes, and was fairly paralyzed, for the leaden messenger travelled down into his neck and along his back. Once more Dan ran, and, fancying the snakes behind him, kept on until he was about ready to drop from exhaustion.

A rest, and again the young soldier set off on the tramp, so tired he could scarcely drag one foot after the other. He had lost all interest in locating Juan the Giant and Jose Toletto, and his one thought was to rejoin Ralph and Poke, and get far away from such a disagreeable bit of territory as this was proving to be.

"If once I get out of this cacti I'll steer clear of it in the future," was what he told himself. "I declare, they are worse than a nest of hornets."

Once more he had become completely turned around, and it was only by looking at the sun that he was able to get even a general "lay of the land."

Presently, as if to tantalize him, he came to a hollow in the rocks, where there was a deep pool of water almost as clear as crystal. He gave a sigh of relief.

"A drink at last," he cried, "and a good wash!" But, alas! when he went to drink the water he found it so brackish and full of salts he could not swallow a mouthful.

With his mouth "full of cotton," as he afterward termed it, he staggered on, each foot now feeling as heavy as lead. He had spent several hours in the tangle of cacti, and he wondered what Poke and Ralph were doing in the meantime.

"I suppose Poke has rejoined Ralph, and both are wondering what has become of me," he mused. "I wish I could lay out a straight course for the spot where I parted with Ralph." But this he could not do, and so had to blunder onward as best he could.

Soon after this, much to his relief, the growth of cacti came to an end, and he found himself in the shelter of a dense grove of trees, the shade of which proved more than welcome to him. Here he felt compelled to sit down and rest, and, while he did this, he attended, as well as he was able, to the many scratches he had received. Among the trees he found a small pool of rain-water, and, though this was warm, it proved delicious, both for drinking and for bathing his hands and face.

He was about to leave the pool when, on gazing

at the ground, he discovered the hoof-prints of a horse running from the pool into the brushwood beyond.

"Somebody has been here!" he thought. "A horseman. Can it have been one of those Mexicans? If so, I'll have to be on my guard, or I'll be captured and made a prisoner of war."

After making the discovery, he lost no time in seeking the shelter of the bushes, and then he pushed onward, laying a course which he thought would bring him out on the highway leading from Toletto's plantation to the mountain path.

He was just passing a clump of bushes when a sound reached his ears like the moving of somebody close at hand.

Instantly he stopped and crouched down, grasping his gun tightly. The sound kept coming closer and closer, until he felt that the invisible horseman was almost on top of him. He strained his eyes, and caught sight of the horse's foreshoulder.

Then he gave a little cry of joy. The horse was not one belonging to the army, — at least, its trappings were of the ordinary Mexican kind, and, what was more, it was riderless.

Rising, he walked straight to the animal. The horse seemed to be glad to meet a human being,

"THE HORSE SEEMED TO BE GLAD TO MEET A HUMAN BEING, AND DID NOT ATTEMPT TO RUN AWAY"

and did not attempt to run away, but brushed his nose affectionately along Dan's arm.

"Want to make friends, eh?" said the young soldier. "Well, I'm willing enough, I can tell you that." He patted the animal on the head. "Will you give me a ride? Will, eh? All right, I'll try you."

In a second more he was in the saddle. The horse did not attempt to move until bidden to do so, and then set off at a gentle pace, which was decidedly welcome to poor overtired Dan.

CHAPTER IX.

ORDERED FORWARD

BEING on horseback gave Dan a feeling of greater safety. If the enemy should suddenly appear in force, he would be able to ride for it, and he did not doubt but that his horse could do about as well as the average animal in the Mexican service.

"And the rattlers can't get at me, either," was his comment. "Ugh! how I hate the things!" And he gave a shudder.

It was impossible to strike a straight course through the bushes and the grove of trees, but, after riding a bit, Dan came out on something like a highway. That it had not been used for some time was evident, for the mud of the recent rains lay undisturbed.

"By the eternal, ef it ain't Dan!"

The voice sounded almost like a shot to the young soldier, and he brought his steed up so

quickly, the animal reared on his haunches. He could see nobody.

"Poke, is that you?" he queried, as soon as he recovered.

"Thet's wot, Dan!" And now Poke Stover dropped from a near-by tree, and strode forward. "An' on a hoss, too! Well, this beats the nation!"

"I picked this horse up a little while ago. But where have you been? I've been hunting high and low for you."

"An' I've been huntin' high an' low fer you an' Ralph."

"Ralph! Isn't he where we left him?"

"You mean whar I left both on ye?"

"Yes."

"No — leastwise, I couldn't see nuthin' of him — nor of you."

"I went off to learn what had become of you, after you had been gone quite awhile."

"I see. An' left Ralph on guard?"

"Yes."

"Well, he ain't there now, Dan. An' I've hunted high an' low fer him an' fer you."

"He must have gone off to look for both of us. What a hide-and-seek game it has been! I got lost in the cacti and almost stung by rattlesnakes,

and I was about ready to drop when I ran across this horse."

"Don't know nuthin' about his owner?"

"No. He's a pretty good beast, one can see that."

"That's so."

"What did you do after you left us?"

"Tried to locate them shots. But I couldn't do it. Then I heard voices and followed up three Mexicans, thinking they was Juan the Giant, Jose Toletto, and another. But they wasn't, so I had my troubles fer my pains. Then I went back to join you an' Ralph, an' couldn't find either on ye."

"I hope Ralph didn't get into trouble while we were gone," said Dan, anxiously. "If he fell in with Badillo and Toletto when he was all alone it might go hard with him. Did you hear any firing?"

"Some, but not in that direction. By the way, I've had neither grub nor water, have you?"

"I've had a drink, but nothing to eat. I wish we knew where Ralph had taken himself to?"

"So do I, Dan. We'll have to keep on hunting for him."

They moved forward, and presently struck a side trail which, in the course of half an hour,

brought them to the spot where they had left Ralph. Each gazed around with an anxious look on his face.

"Not here," came laconically from the old frontiersman. "An' he ain't been here since I was here before, nuther."

"How do you know?"

"Don't you see the writin' I left on the rock? If he had been here he would have left an answer."

"That's true. What do you reckon we had best do next?"

The old frontiersman scratched his head.

"Must say as I hardly know what to advise, Dan. Of course we don't want to leave Ralph behind."

"Well, I just guess not!"

"Exactly, an' thet bein' so, all we can do is to stay around an' keep our eyes open."

"If he went off of his own free will he'd come back here — if he could get back."

"I don't doubt it, Dan."

Fortunately they had brought with them some army rations, which had been left at the rocks. They now ate their portion of the food, and Poke went off in search of a spring below the rocks, where he filled their canteens with water. Then,

tethering the horse close by, both rested in the grass.

Slowly the day grew to a close. With the going down of the sun Dan's heart grew heavier and heavier. Surely Ralph had gotten into trouble. Perhaps he was dead? He gave something of a groan, which reached Poke's ears.

"Don't take it so hard, lad," said the frontiersman. "Let us hope fer the best."

"Shall we stay here all night, Poke?"

"I don't reckon it would do any good. We had better return to camp and report. Maybe the commander will send a detachment out at daybreak, — to look into thet matter of Mexicans and ammunition, — and thet will give us another chance to look around fer your brother."

"I hope it does — if he doesn't — return in the meantime."

When they started to return to camp the horse was thoroughly rested, so both rode the greater part of the way. Nothing of importance happened *en route*, and on arriving at camp they went straight to headquarters.

The commander in charge listened with interest to what Dan had to report.

"If those Mexicans were carrying ammunition we ought certainly to get after them," he said.

"I know we are surrounded by enemies, and if we can stop such work it will teach them at least one lesson."

The matter was talked over for quarter of an hour, and Poke was also questioned. Then it was decided to send out a company of soldiers early the next morning, and Dan and Poke were told they could go along as guides.

Had his mind been free from care, Dan would have slept soundly that night. But his thoughts were continually on Ralph, and it was a good two hours ere he went to sleep, and then it was to dream of all sorts of troubles, both for his brother and himself.

The company to go out was that to which Dan and Poke belonged. The officers were on horseback, and Poke was likewise provided with a steed, while Dan rode the animal he had picked up, and which he had named Star, because of a blaze on his forehead.

Three hours later found the soldiers in the heart of the territory where Poke and Dan had instituted their search. At first they could discover but little, and the captain in command was thinking of going back, when some of his men came upon some ammunition lying on the road, along with a part of a box cover, which had been broken off.

"You are right about the ammunition," said the captain to Dan. "I only hope the greasers come along with more."

A little later Poke, who had climbed a tree to take a look around, announced that a body of Mexicans were coming along the mountain trail to the westward. The enemy were about twenty in number, and had with them twelve horses and mules, all heavily loaded with boxes and bundles.

As soon as this announcement was made, the captain ordered his command to march on the Mexicans, and away went the Americans on the double-quick, over the rocks and through the mesquite brush.

The two parties were still two hundred yards apart when the Mexicans discovered the enemy and set up a shout of alarm. At first they were for taking a stand, and a dozen or more shots were exchanged. But then the Mexicans took to their heels, urging the horses and mules along with all speed.

"After them!" came the command, and the company of soldiers did as bidden, and soon another volley of shots were exchanged. Two Mexicans dropped, one killed outright and the other badly wounded. The balance of the party

ran into the bushes, leaving their horses and mules to take care of themselves.

An hour later the horses and mules were rounded up, and the boxes and bundles were found to contain not only ammunition, but also some medicines of which the Mexican soldiers were in need. Everything was of course confiscated. Two Mexicans were captured, but the others could not be found.

After this skirmish a hunt lasting three hours was instituted, but nothing could be learned concerning Ralph. Dan was more disheartened than ever.

"We'll have to give it up," said the captain to the young soldier. "I am sorry for you, but what more can I do?"

"I would like to question the prisoners," said Dan.

Permission was given, and through one of the soldiers who could talk Spanish the prisoners and also the wounded Mexican were closely questioned.

The men who were uninjured could tell nothing, but the wounded prisoner was better informed.

"Yes, I know of the young soldier," he said. "He was captured and taken forward as a prisoner of war," and he gave some of the details, as already recorded in these pages.

"Where will they take him?"

"I cannot tell exactly. Probably to one of our Mexican prisons or prison yards."

This was all the Mexican could tell, but it was enough to make Dan shudder. Ralph was then really a prisoner. Would he ever see his brother again?

"It's too bad," he groaned. "I've been a prisoner myself and I know just how bad they can treat a fellow."

The Mexicans were questioned about Juan the Giant and Jose Toletto, and one of them said he believed the men had gone southward, although to where he could not tell. He said Juan the Giant was well known and had more enemies than friends, and consequently was liable to keep himself out of sight most of the time.

When the command returned to camp it was found that orders had come in to move forward without delay. General Scott was ready to sail down the gulf with his flotilla of warships and transports, and they must march to the transport and get aboard without further loss of time.

"I wish I could stay behind," said Dan, regretfully. "I might be able to help Ralph somehow."

"I can't see it, Dan," answered Poke. "We may be able to do more good by going forward

with General Scott and bringing the greasers to terms. As soon as the war is over all the prisoners will most likely be set free."

"Yes, but the war isn't over yet, Poke — not by a good deal," concluded the young soldier. And he told the truth, as the chapters to follow will prove.

CHAPTER X.

GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT

For the expedition now at hand no American commander was more competent to take charge than was General Winfield Scott, who was now advancing upon Vera Cruz with about twelve thousand soldiers, which included the divisions of Generals Worth, Pillow, Quitman, and Twiggs, these having all joined the war-ships and transports near the mouth of the Rio Grande.

General Scott was of Southern blood, having been born in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1786. After a course at William and Mary College he became a lawyer at the age of twenty. But this evidently did not suit his taste, and two years later he became a soldier, entering the United States army as captain.

He was now in his element, and when the war of 1812 broke out he went to the front and distinguished himself at the attack on Queenstown Heights and at the battles of Chippewa, Lundy's

Lane and other contests, which speedily raised him to the position of a brevet major-general.

The second war with England was followed by twenty years of comparative peace, but when the war with the Creeks and Seminole Indians broke out in 1835, General Scott again became a leading figure, and so effective was his military work that in 1841 he was made commander-in-chief of the whole United States army. He assumed the position with a strong determination to place our army on a first-class footing, and it was largely through his efforts that Taylor and other generals were enabled to do such effective work along the Rio Grande and at other points.

The commands to which Dan, Ralph, and Poke belonged had been assigned to quarters on a large transport which had in years gone by done duty as a cotton-boat on the Mississippi. The craft was roomy, and though the soldiers were at rather close quarters, they were by no means crowded. But the weather was growing warmer each day, and below decks it was close and hot.

Dan saw the shore fade from view with a regretful sigh. Had Ralph been along, the advance on the enemy would have been hailed with delight. But his brother's absence made his heart sink like a lump of lead within his bosom.

COLUMBUS MEMORIAL LIBRARY CITY OF WASHINGTON

Just before leaving Dan had received two letters from home, one intended for himself and one for Ralph, and both containing about the same information. Mr. Radbury wrote that all was going on well at the ranch and that he was feeling slightly better than he had when writing before. He wrote that Oliver Fielding had arrived home, and that a doctor from Gonzales had operated on his eyes with marked success. Mr. Radbury added that he trusted both of his sons continued in good health and that they would keep out of all harm, and also put in a good word concerning Poke.

"Father won't feel so happy when he gets my letter telling of Ralph's disappearance," said Dan to Poke, for he had already sent a communication through the army postmaster. "It will break him all up to think Ralph is a prisoner, or worse. At first I thought of keeping the truth from him, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

"No, it's better he should know the worst," answered the old frontiersman. "He'd be bound to find it out sooner or later anyhow."

Because of the close quarters, Dan was thrown in constantly with the men in the command to which Ralph belonged. He already knew some of them, including Corporal Tim McManus, who

was loud in bewailing the fate that had overtaken the younger Radbury.

"Sure, an' it's a cryin' shame, so it is!" said Corporal Tim. "Such a foine b'y as he was! I hope wid all me heart he gits away from the greasers, an' that right quickly."

"If he had been minding his business, he wouldn't have been caught," put in Dwight Pellingham, who stood near. "He had no right to go off on a pleasure trip when he was sent down here to fight."

"Sure an' he wasn't on a pleasure thrip, Pellingham, ye know he wasn't. He had private business —"

"Oh, pshaw, don't tell me that. He was out for a good time. More than likely he made some planter give up a couple of bottles of wine, and then he got scooped in after drinking. I know him well enough." And Dwight Pellingham tossed his head contemptuously.

Dan heard this talk, and it made his face burn. He stepped up close to the foppish young soldier.

"See here, I don't know who you are, but I'll thank you not to talk like that about my brother," he said, coldly. "Ralph doesn't drink, and, if he did, he wouldn't rob a planter of his wine."

Dwight Pellingham glared at the older Radbury

in amazement, but, when he met Dan's steady gaze, he fell back a little. "I — er — I'll say what I please," he faltered.

"No, you won't say what you please," came quickly.

"Who are you?"

"I am Dan Radbury, the brother of the soldier you are blackmailing."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of you. Both of you Radburys have a pretty good opinion of yourselves."

"We have too good an opinion to let you or anybody else abuse us."

"Indeed!" sneered Pellingham. "Where did you get that good opinion — cow-punching on your Texas ranch?" And he uttered the words as if cattle-raising was the lowest occupation in the world.

Dan's face flushed hotly, for he was getting more angry each instant. "See here," he said, trying to command himself, "I want no quarrel with you. As for cow-punching, as you call it, it's none of your business what I do. But I won't have you running down my brother. He's a good fellow, and —"

"Sure, an' he's the best fellow in the company," broke in Tim McManus. "Pitch into him, Dan, me b'y. He deserves it."

By this time the sharp talking had attracted quite a crowd. The scene was below decks, near the bow of the boat, and no officers happened to be near.

"What's the row?" questioned several.

"Pellingham has been afther running down Ralph Radbury," replied Corporal Tim. "This is Dan Radbury, an' he said he won't stand what Pellingham says."

"You keep your mouth shut, Irish!" retorted Dwight Pellingham. "I know what I'm doing, and don't want any advice from you."

"Sure, an' you'll git no advice, but you'll git me fist!" cried Tim McManus. "Ralph's a good b'y, an' I'm fer sthickin' up fer him every toime."

"I want no quarrel with anybody," said Dan, "but I won't allow this fellow to talk against Ralph."

"You — you haven't any business at this end of the boat," came from Pellingham, who knew not how to go on. "You clear out and leave us alone."

"Don't you go, Radbury," came from several.

"If you stay here I'll report you."

Dan looked at Pellingham steadily.

"Go ahead and report. I have as much right as anybody to walk around, even though my com-

pany is quartered farther aft. You remember what I said about Ralph."

"I'll say what I please. If he was captured, it was his own fault. He was always getting into trouble."

"Oh, give us a rest, Pelly," came from a soldier standing in the rear of the crowd. "You'll never be captured, for you'll always be found in the rear rank!" And a laugh went up at this sally.

The laugh made the foppish soldier furious, and he shook his fist at the hidden speaker. "You're all down on me, but I'll show you — see if I don't!"

"What are you going to show us?" asked another. "The latest pair of silk socks your pa sent to you?" and another laugh went up.

"He's a dear boy, Dwighty is, and should be put in a bandbox for safe-keeping," came from another soldier, and the laughing continued.

Now furious, Dwight Pellingham raised his fist again, and shoved Dan away from him, and up against several other soldiers. Dan resented this by catching Pellingham by the shoulder, and holding him. At the same time somebody shoved the foppish young soldier's cap down over his eyes, and, putting out his foot, Tim McManus sent him down on his back on the deck.

Instantly there was an uproar, for in those days soldiers loved to indulge in "horse" play, and play of this sort was much rougher than it is to-day, excepting at certain isolated western army posts. There was a "pile on," regardless of who was underneath, and, in a twinkle, Dwight Pellingham found himself at the bottom of a mass of ten or a dozen soldiers, all squirming and kicking good-naturedly. Dan was also caught in the mass, but soon managed to extricate himself and back away.

When the mix-up was straightened out, it was found that Dwight Pellingham had had his uniform torn in several places, and that both he and the suit were covered with the dirt of the deck, which at this spot happened to be much in evidence. More than this, his nose had come into violent contact with the planking, and was bleeding in consequence.

"I'll — I'll have you all arrested for this!" he roared, glaring at those standing near. "Look at my uniform and my nose! Dan Radbury, you are responsible for this."

"That's what he is," put in a soldier who had just come up, Jack Bracer. Bracer was a man from Texas, whose reputation was none of the best, but for some reason Pellingham had made of him a crony.

"I'm not responsible," answered Dan, stoutly. "You brought it on yourself."

"I say you are responsible!" howled the foppish soldier. "Nobody would have piled on me if it hadn't been for you. You and that stuck-up brother of yours think you can both ride over me. But I'll show you that you can't. Here comes Major Dunlap. I'm going to report you, and see that you are placed where you belong."

And, before anybody could stop him, Dwight Pellingham ran from the crowd and toward the officer, who at that moment was coming up.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ENEMY ON SHIPBOARD

"HERE, what's the row?" questioned Major Dunlap, as he strode up, attracted by the unusual crowd and the earnest talking. He was a tall, fierce-looking military man, and a strict disciplinarian.

"If you please, major, I wish to report this fellow," replied Dwight Pellingham, and he pointed at Dan.

"What for?"

"For starting a row and pitching into me."

"It is not true," returned Dan, hotly.

"And I say it is true. He pitched into me without the slightest reason."

"Oh! Oh!" came in a groan from several of the other soldiers.

"I never pitched into him at all," said Dan. "He started the trouble, and he took hold of me before I ever touched him."

"It's not so, sir. He—"

"Silence!" commanded Major Dunlap. "One at a time. Now, Pellingham, state your side of the story. Then I'll listen to Radbury and the others."

In as skilful a manner as possible Dwight Pellingham told his version of the affair. It was grossly exaggerated and, of course, entirely in his favor.

"And Jack Bracer there will prove what I say," concluded the foppish soldier.

"That's the truth, Major Dunlap," put in Bracer, promptly.

"And what have you to say to this?" demanded the major, turning to Dan.

"He doesn't tell the truth, and Jack Bracer was not here when the trouble started, sir. We —"

"I was here," roared Bracer. "I stood behind Radbury. Probably he didn't see me."

"I will listen to Radbury's story now," interrupted Major Dunlap, coldly.

Then Dan told his tale from beginning to end, as it has been related here. He was interrupted several times by Pellingham and his crony, but the major quickly quieted the pair.

"You are sure you didn't trip Pellingham up?" questioned the major.

"I am positive, sir."

"I know he didn't," put in a soldier standing near. "I saw the foot go out and wind around Pellingham's ankle. It was not Radbury's foot."

"And whose foot was it, Heffner?"

"I can't answer that question, sir," replied Heffner. He more than half suspected Tim McManus, but he did not feel inclined to say so.

"This whole affair seems to be a tempest in a teapot," said the major, finally. "You, Pellingham, had no right to speak of Radbury's brother in such a disrespectful manner. He went out on an authorized mission, and not to steal anybody's wine. And Dan Radbury had a right to walk to this part of the ship, although no right to make it his stopping quarters. I will let the whole case pass as it is. But I warn you all to be more careful in the future. If I hear of any 'piling on,' as you call it, I'll put you all in the ship's brig for twenty-four hours. You'll find it pretty hot and uncomfortable in there, too."

Thus speaking, the major walked away, and with him went several of the soldiers. Then came a call to drill, and Dan and Pellingham separated without further words. But when the foppish soldier walked off he gave Dan a look as black as a thunder-cloud.

"Sure, an' he's got it in fer ye," whispered McManus, to Dan. "He'll lay awake nights thinkin' av how to git square, so he will!"

"In that case I'll have to be on my guard," returned Dan.

On the way to the drill Dan met Poke, who had been in the room where some guns were stored, aiding in cleaning up the weapons.

"Had a row, so I heard," said the old frontiersman. "If I was you I'd give thet sissy soldier a wide berth."

"I want nothing more to do with him, but I am not afraid of him, — and he sha'n't spout out against Ralph."

"Oh, I wouldn't allow thet, nuther."

The drill was one which occurred daily and lasted the best part of half an hour. When it was over the soldiers were set to work to clean up their quarters, and this occupied another half-hour, and then it was mess time.

The distance from the mouth of the Rio Grande River to Vera Cruz is about five hundred miles, consequently the soldier boys had to spend quite a few days on the transports, which moved slowly and cautiously, not knowing what each day might bring forth. Mexico at this time had but few war-ships, yet it was felt that even a single ship, well armed,

might do much damage among the heavily loaded transports.

It was the 7th of March when the transport carrying Dan and Poke came in sight of Vera Cruz, a low-lying city, surrounded by a stone wall two miles long. The houses were of stone, most of them two stories in height, with low walls around the roofs. The city stood on a sandy plain, backed up by sandy hills, cut up in many places by *arroyos*, or gullies, and covered thickly with chaparral.

In front of the city, on a reef-like island, stood an old stone fort, or castle, called San Juan d'Ulloa. This was truly an historic spot, having been built by the Spaniards in 1582 at a cost of forty millions of dollars! It was a heavily armed place, and was the last to be surrendered by Spain when Mexico declared herself free and independent.

The war-ships and transports came to anchor about two miles below the city, and then came up the question of how the army should be landed, for to bring the ships to the beach with its booming surf was out of the question.

"We're to land in surf-boats," said Dan, on the morning of the second day after anchoring. "I just got word from the captain."

"Sure an' that's no easy job," replied Corporal

Tim, dubiously. "Should we be afther strikin' a wave sideways we'd all go to the bottom."

"Well, I reckon they won't charge ye nuthin' fer the duckin'," replied Poke, dryly.

"Charge me, is it?" cried McManus. "Sure an' it's not meself as wants a swim, at all, at all," and he shook his head. "I'm not a fish, but a man wid two legs, mint fer walkin'."

An hour later a dozen surf-boats came alongside and the task of landing the soldiers from that transport began. All told, sixty-five surf-boats were in use, making a busy time. Several hundred soldiers were landed at a time, and in one hour General Worth's division of four thousand five hundred men was on the beach, having suffered nothing more than a wetting of feet as they leaped from the boats to the rising sand beyond. On board two of the ships the bands were playing, and this, with the bright sunshine and the sparkling water, made the scene an animated one.

Corporal Tim did not like the water, having been brought up inland, where the largest stream was little better than a brook.

"Sure an' I know I'll be drowned!" he said, as he entered one of the small craft. "It's a wobbly thing now, isn't it — a regular whale wid a drunk

on. Sure an' I'd rather be afther walking tin mile be land, so I would!"

Dan was in the craft with him and cautioned him to be quiet and keep his seat. All went well until they were about fifty yards from the beach, when a rather heavy wave caught the surf-boat in the rear and sent the flying spray over all the occupants.

"I knew it! I knew it!" shrieked McManus, leaping to his feet. "I knew we'd be afther goin' to the bottom of the say!"

He flung his arms out wildly, making a clutch at Dan. But before the latter could catch hold of him, he lost his balance and fell overboard with a loud splash.

Instantly there was a commotion, mingled with a shout of laughter, as Corporal Tim bobbed up into view, spluttering and waving his hands frantically.

"Save me! Save me!" shrieked the unfortunate. "Fer the love av hiven, don't let me drown like a rat in a trap! Save me, Dan!"

"I will, only keep still," answered Dan. "Give me your hand."

"Save me!" And poor bewildered Corporal Tim thrashed around so madly that to get him into the boat was utterly impossible. But Dan

caught his hand and held on to him, and thus he was dragged closer to the shore.

"Ain't ye goin' to save me?" he spluttered. "Save me, do, that's a good b'y!"

"If you'll stop kicking perhaps I can get you into the boat," answered Dan.

"I'm afther bein' drowned!"

"Not if you'll keep your mouth shut, Tim."

"Sure an' I can't hold up much longer. Pull me into the boat, Dan, me b'y!"

By this time the craft was so close to shore that all danger was past. But Tim did not know this and continued to struggle as hard as ever.

"I'm a goner, Dan!" he shrieked. "Sure, an' I didn't think ye would leave me to drown," he added, reproachfully.

"Corporal, put down your feet and walk ashore," said the officer in command of the boat.

"Put down me fate, Lieutenant Bliss?"

"That's what I said. Now, men, ready all? Jump for it!"

The men jumped, and as they did so Corporal Tim put down his feet. The water was hardly up to his waist, and he looked sheepish. He made a wild dash and was soon up on the beach with the others.

"I — I was afther thinkin' the water was about

a mile deep," he said. "Sure an' it was a narrow escape anyway," he added. "A mon as can't swim can drown in a bath-tub!"

"I think you had better learn to swim," said Dan, with a smile he could not suppress. "If we stay here I'll show you."

"Not fer a hundred dollars, Dan — not fer a thousand. As I said before, I'm no fish."

"But it might come useful to you, Tim, some day."

"No, I have no use fer the water. All me ocean trips will be taken on land," and with this speech, McManus strode off to attend to his military duties.

CHAPTER XII.

LANDING AT VERA CRUZ

It must not be supposed that the Mexicans allowed the landing of the United States troops to pass without doing something to stop it. The fort in front of the city sent a number of shots in the direction of the surf-boats, and some cannon in the city also opened fire.

"It's a welcome we're getting," remarked Poke to Dan, as they marched up the beach to the spot chosen for the command. "Sorry we can't return the compliment."

"I don't believe they can reach us at such a distance," said Dan.

"Don't be too sure, Dan. They ought to have some putty big cannon in thet old fort. Why, it's been there for ages, so I was told."

Poke had scarcely spoken when there came a strange humming in the air and a cannon-ball came rolling up the beach, scattering the loose sand in all directions.

As it happened, Dwight Pellingham was almost in the track of the ball and had his back to it. As it spun along and sent the sand up against his neck and ears, he gave a wild leap for safety.

"I'm hit! I'm killed!" he shrieked. "I'm a dead man," and then, as he put his hand to his ear and withdrew it covered with the blood from a scratch, he gave another shriek and fell headlong.

An officer ran to him and raised him up, while a crowd gathered.

"Where are you hit?" was the question put to the frightened soldier.

"Here, in the head. A bullet went into my ear."

"It was sand from the cannon-ball," said a soldier, who had also got a dose. "It wasn't a bullet at all."

At this Dwight Pellingham stared around, as if unwilling to believe the truth. Then he felt of his ears and neck and gave a gasp.

"Sure there isn't a bullet in my head?"

"Quite sure," said the officer, after a close examination. "I reckon you are more frightened than hurt."

"It — it was a — a close shave," faltered Pellingham, and then he arose and stalked off — to

wash himself at the edge of the beach and put some court-plaster on the worst of his scratches.

He had seen Dan laughing with the rest and this made him more angry than ever at the young soldier.

"I'll fix you yet, see if I don't," he muttered.

Many of the soldiers had an idea that General Scott would direct an immediate attack on Vera Cruz, but such was not the plan of this skilful commander. He knew that both the city and the castle before it were heavily fortified and that an assault would be attended with a great loss of life. He resolved to surround the place, plant his heavy cannon with care, and then bombard Vera Cruz into submission.

The troops had landed on the 6th of March, and inside of three days General Scott had his different commands carefully placed to the north, the west, and the south of the city. Each company was well hidden behind the sand-hills and the heavy undergrowth, or in trenches especially constructed for that purpose.

No sooner did the United States soldiers appear around the city than the guns from the fort and Vera Cruz itself spoke up loudly, and their furious firing was kept up for several days. This being the case, to go close to the stone wall was exceed-

ingly dangerous, and it was no light work to place the batteries where they would be likely to do effective work when called into use. To add to the troubles of General Scott's command, several northers came down in all their fury, so that for two days it was all but impossible to land anything heavy on the beach. In the worst of the blow more than one boat rocked so hard that part of its load slipped overboard and went to the bottom of the gulf.

In the work of investing the city Dan and Poke had to do their full share, and more than one day was spent with a pick and shovel, digging a trench or raising a breastworks. It was laborious toil, but neither complained. But they often heard Dwight Pellingham finding fault.

"I didn't join the army as a laborer," growled the foppish soldier. "I came to fight and to teach the Mexicans a lesson."

"Well, you are teaching them a lesson — in industry," said an under officer, and this raised a laugh at Pellingham's expense.

One afternoon Pellingham, Bracer, Dan, and a dozen others were sent to clean out a gully of brushwood, so that the soldiers might move from one end of it to the other with ease. Pellingham was in a bad humor and did not wish to work.

Dan went about his task cheerfully, paying no attention to the fop.

Half an hour later, while Dan was bending over at the bottom of the gully, a shovelful of dirt came down on his head, some going down the collar of his shirt, he having removed his coat.

He knocked off the most of the dirt, and looking up, was just in time to see somebody disappear from the edge of the *arroyo*. Without stopping to think twice, he climbed up the side of the hollow and made after the fellow, who was now behind some bushes.

His tormentor was Pellingham, and soon they stood face to face. Dan had a clod of dirt in his hand, and let the fop have this, hitting him in the nose.

"Hi! hi! stop!" roared Pellingham.

"Well then, you stop," retorted Dan. "What right had you to shovel dirt on me?"

"I — I didn't."

"You did. I saw you."

"I — I didn't know you were down there."

"Indeed! In that case, why did you shovel dirt into the gully when we were sent here to clean the place out?"

"That was my business."

"Well, if you drop any more dirt on me, Dwight

Pellingham, we'll have a settlement you least expect."

"Huh! Do you want to fight?"

"No, I don't want to fight you. But I'll give you a sound thrashing."

Dwight tried to bluster, but he could not frighten Dan, and soon went off grumbling to himself. His place was further down the hollow, and here he rejoined his crony, Jack Bracer, whom he left but a short while before.

"How did you make out?" asked Bracer, who knew Pellingham had gone off to torment Dan.

"I let him have it all right enough, but he spotted me and let me have a lump of dirt in return."

"Struck you, eh?"

"Yes, but it wasn't much. I tell you, Jack, I hate that fellow."

"I don't like him myself."

"I wish I could get square with him."

"Well, that's what you were going to do just now."

"I mean I wish I could teach him a lesson he wouldn't forget for a long while."

"I see. Can't you hatch up some plot against him?"

"I'm going to try it. He's been laughing at me ever since we had the row on the ship."

"I know it. He thinks a city fellow is of no account. Even if we did great things in a battle these backwoods fellows wouldn't give us any credit."

"That's what I think. I wish I could get Radbury into trouble with our officers. That would put his nose out of joint."

"So it would. But, if you did anything, you'd have to be careful."

"Oh, I'd be careful enough. But wouldn't you want to help me?" went on Pellingham, who generally relied on Bracer to aid him in his various plans.

"To be sure I'd help you. But we mustn't get ourselves in a hole. If we did, he'd have a worse laugh on us than ever."

"We must think of something. I can —"

"Hush, here comes Stover. He's Radbury's best friend. If he learns anything, he'll go right to Radbury with it."

As Poke came closer, they stopped their talk, and began to work in silence. Poke had been working farther up the hollow, but his portion of the task was now finished, while those of Bracer and of Pellingham were scarcely begun.

"Hullo, ye ain't done much," observed Poke, as he looked down on them for a moment.

"It's none of your affair even so," retorted Pellingham. "Mind your own business."

"Thanks, I will. Didn't know but what ye'd like me to give ye a lift." And with this dry remark Poke strode on.

Although they did not know it, Poke had caught a few words of their conversation, and he took good care to remember them.

"Jest met thet Pellingham an' thet Bracer up the gully," he said, as he dropped down beside Dan. "They're a likely team, they are."

"I've had more trouble with Pellingham," answered Dan, and told of what had occurred.

"Then thet accounts fer it," said the old frontiersman, when he had finished.

"Accounts for what, Poke?"

"When I came along, they war talkin' about ye, lad. I didn't catch all they said, but it seems to me they war plottin' to do ye an injury."

"What can they do?"

"I don't know. But you want to keep your eyes open. To my mind, that Jack Bracer is a reg'lar snake in the grass."

"I agree with you there."

"Between the two they may hatch up something pretty dirty."

"I don't think Pellingham is wicked at heart."

"Nuther do I, Dan. But he is mad at you, and he is under Bracer's influence. Bracer may get him to do worse than he'd think of doing if left to himself."

"Well, I'll keep my eyes wide open," concluded Dan, and there the subject was dropped, and he went to work harder than ever, to make up for the time he had lost in chasing Pellingham.

CHAPTER XIII.

RALPH'S HIDING-PLACE

It is now high time to go back to Ralph, and see how he fared in his efforts to get out of the underground passage, and away from the Mexican soldiers who were pursuing him.

The fall of dirt behind him had blocked the passage completely, so that none of the enemy could reach him from that direction.

But how long would it take them to go back, and did they know where the passageway ran to? These were the burning questions he asked himself. Perhaps they would be waiting at the other end to capture him the moment he appeared.

But, even as these thoughts coursed through his brain, he kept on, stumbling over stones and tree roots, until he reached a series of rude steps. Up these he felt his way, suddenly coming into the open air at a point where there was a dense grove of trees, with a branch of the river not a hundred feet away.

No Mexicans were in sight, and for this he breathed a short sigh of relief. But he knew they would soon be upon him, for he could already hear the sounds of an alarm from the castle court-yard.

He darted in among the trees, and made his way to the river bank. Several boats were at hand, but they were clumsy affairs, and had neither oars nor paddles.

"They'd soon get me if I took a boat," he thought. Then, on second thought, he shoved one of the boats from the bank, and sent it adrift. "Now if they think I went off in that, it will put them on the wrong trail," he told himself.

Knowing nothing better to do, he ran along the river bank until he reached a sort of summer-house, built of stone, with an elaborate roofing of planks and heavy timbers, and thickly overgrown with vines.

His pursuers were now coming closer, and, hardly knowing what to do next, he darted into the summer-house. A look overhead showed him something of a hiding-place between the heavy timbers and the sloping boards above, and he hastily climbed to this retreat, thick with dirt and cobwebs.

Ralph had been hidden less than three minutes

when he heard several persons approaching, and soon four Mexicans came in. It was a detail of three privates with an under officer, and all talked volubly as they gazed around, although Ralph could make out little of what they said, excepting that they were looking for him, and wondered if he was still in the grounds or had taken to the river.

Scarcely daring to breath, the young soldier remained prostrate on the timbers. His position was far from comfortable, yet he dared not change it, for fear of attracting the attention of those below him. Every instant he was afraid they would look up and discover him.

At length the under officer gave some orders to one of the soldiers, and then marched off with two of the men, leaving the third behind.

That this third man had been placed on guard there could be no doubt, for he stationed himself on a bench in the centre of the summer-house, with his musket over his knees, and kept a strict look-out on all sides of him.

Thus quarter of an hour passed, and in the meantime Ralph heard other guards travel up and down the river and in various other directions. Lanterns could be seen bobbing up here and there, showing that the Mexicans were doing their utmost to locate him.

"If they find me, more than likely they'll shoot me on the spot," he reasoned, grimly.

The stars shone brightly, so that it was not as dark as it might otherwise have been. To pass the time, the guard below lit one cigarette after another, the smoke drifting upward to where the anxious young soldier rested.

Inside of half an hour Ralph felt cramped in every limb, and at the risk of making himself heard, turned over into a new position. He did this as the guard arose to walk around the summer-house, and the fellow failed to hear the slight noise he made.

"This is getting monotonous, to say the least," thought the young soldier. "I wonder if that fellow intends to stay there all night?"

Another hour passed, and still the guard stayed on. By this time the voices along the river were no longer to be heard, and only one or two lanterns pierced the semi-darkness.

Presently the guard forgot to light another cigarette, and gazing down on him, Ralph saw the fellow droop in a heap on the bench, as if he was going to sleep.

"Oh, if only he would go to sleep!" murmured the young soldier.

Several times the Mexican roused himself, only

to sink into a deeper nap than ever. At last Ralph heard him draw a deep sigh and begin to snore.

"Now is my chance, now or never!" he told himself, and with extreme caution began to descend from his hiding-place.

The only opening near the roof of the summer-house was at the centre, so that the young soldier had to climb down almost on top of the snoring Mexican.

As he descended he loosened some of the dirt on the timbers, and this fell down, hitting the Mexican on the ears and neck.

He started up, thinking some insects had attacked him, and made a move as if to brush them off. Then he glanced up and uttered a cry as he caught sight of Ralph's legs dangling above him.

The moment Ralph heard the cry he gave himself up for lost. Then, with a hope born of despair, he let himself go and landed as heavily as possible on the guard's shoulders. Down went the Mexican on the floor with the American lad astride of his shoulders, and then the pair rolled over and over.

The Mexican it must be confessed was bewildered, for he had not dreamed that the escaped prisoner was so close at hand. Consequently he

had hardly time to recover before Ralph had him by the throat, thus preventing any outcry.

The Mexican was far from a weakling. He was big and strong, and when there was no war was a ranch-hand, used to rounding up cattle. He struggled lustily, and for the moment it looked as if he would get the better of his opponent.

But a well directed blow from Ralph finished the contest in surprisingly short order. The blow landed squarely on the Mexican's temple and partly stunned him. Ere he could recover, Ralph had the gun and dealt him a second blow, and then he lay like a log where he had fallen.

For several minutes after the contest was over the young soldier stood in the summer-house, panting to get back his breath. He kept the gun in his hands, and it is more than likely he would have discharged it at anybody who had appeared to capture him.

But the noise of the struggle had attracted no attention, and after relieving the guard of his ammunition, and putting the same in his pockets, Ralph stole forth from the summer-house and skulked along the bushes, in a direction away from the old castle. He knew not where he was going, and just then did not care, his one object being to put distance between himself and his enemies.

The night was now well advanced, and Ralph knew that in a few hours more the first streaks of dawn would be at hand. If he was to get away at all it must be while daylight lasted.

Presently he came upon a broad roadway. Some distance beyond was a tall stone wall with a gateway. He must either climb over the wall or go through the opening. As there were several guards at the gateway, he decided to climb the wall.

This was no easy matter, for the wall was of smooth stone and all of ten feet high. He looked in vain for a bench or ladder; nothing of the sort was around.

But he found something else, which gave him another idea. The something else was a collection of rude stoneware pots, such as are still to be seen in Mexico. The pots were both large and small and smooth at both top and bottom. He decided to build himself a pyramid of the pots and get over the wall by this means.

To think was to act, and quickly he arranged the pots, with the largest at the bottom and the smallest at the top. They reached to within four feet of the top of the wall, and he calculated that by climbing the pile he could get over the wall with ease.

But Ralph was no acrobat, and to climb to the top of the pyramid was no easy task. With his gun over his shoulder, he went up cautiously, balancing himself against the wall in the meantime.

He had almost gained the last pot when the pile began to tremble. Thinking it was going over, he made a clutch at the top of the wall and drew himself up. Then the pile did go over, with a crash to be heard a long distance away.

"If they didn't hear that they must be deaf," he muttered, and then prepared to drop to the outer side of the wall, when he made the discovery that the wall was built on the very edge of a cliff, and that the distance to the bottom was all of thirty or forty feet!

"I might have known it!" he groaned. "What a fool I was to come up here! Now they are bound to get me."

But though he spoke thus, he had no idea of giving up yet. From a distance came a call to arms, and he heard guards from the gateway hurrying in his direction. The top of the wall was about two feet broad, and he felt his way along this, walking away from the gateway.

But this soon brought him in sight of the river bank, and again he paused. The cliff outside was

now not so high, and risking a broken limb, Ralph allowed himself to drop into the space below.

Fortunately he landed into nothing worse than a number of plain bushes, although some cacti were not far off. He rolled over into a hollow and from this picked himself up. At a distance he made out a grove of trees, and started for these. He did not stop running until he was in the very centre of the grove. Here he found a slight depression, and sank into this, drawing the bushes around him, and anxiously awaited the next movement of the Mexicans who were after him.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION

FOR fully quarter of an hour Ralph remained where he was, not making a sound. He imagined that the Mexicans would come down upon him at any moment, and wondered whether it would be better to submit if they did so, or put up a fight.

But as the enemy failed to put in an appearance he gradually grew more calm. Cautiously he shifted his position, until he gained a hiding-place among a mass of rocks.

His adventures had tired him greatly, and soon he found himself hardly able to keep his eyes open.

"This won't do," he told himself. "I might go to sleep if I was farther off, but not here."

Just before the sun rose over the hills to the east, he started off again, striking out as nearly as he could for the Rio Grande.

Half a mile was covered and he came across an old trail winding in and out among a series of low hills.

"THE VAQUERO . . . LEAPED ON THE ANIMAL'S BACK, AND RODE OFF"

Here he found a brook, where he procured a drink and took a refreshing wash. The washing brightened him greatly, and he went on, feeling refreshed.

Presently Ralph came in sight of a long, low dwelling, thickly overgrown with vines. The place looked deserted, but as he was approaching it, a *vaquero* came forth, lariat in hand, and smoking. Instantly the young soldier dodged out of sight.

The *vaquero* locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Then he stalked to a neighboring shed, brought forth a bronco, leaped on the animal's back, and rode off.

"He must have been alone, or he wouldn't have locked up," thought Ralph. "Wonder if he left anything behind fit to eat."

The young soldier was tremendously hungry and he was willing to take more or less risk in an endeavor to satisfy the cravings of his stomach. Moving to the building, he looked in at first one window and then another. Apparently nobody was near. The windows had bars of tough wood over them, but one of the bars was loose and he pulled it out of place with ease. Then he leaped through the opening.

The dwelling consisted of four rooms, all on the

ground floor, with something of a general loft overhead, reached by a ladder from one of the sleeping-apartments. There was hardly any furniture, but in the living-room was a closet, and here, on a shelf suspended by four wires covered with gum to keep off the ants, were several pots containing bread, dried beef, coffee, sugar, and two or three other things good to eat.

"Hurrah! Just what I want!" cried Ralph to himself, and his cautiousness vanished at the sight of the eatables. "I must have a square meal before I go another step."

A little Mexican stove was handy, still containing some hot embers, and soon he had some water boiling and was making coffee. One pot contained two eggs, and these he boiled. In less than fifteen minutes he had an appetizing meal ready, and then he sat down to enjoy it to its fullest.

"You seem to enjoy our food, señor."

Had a bomb exploded over his head Ralph would not have been more astonished than he was when he heard those words, spoken so close at hand. He leaped to his feet and wheeled around, to discover a middle-aged woman standing in the doorway of one of the other rooms, gazing fixedly at him. The woman was apparently a Mexican, although she spoke excellent English. She held

"'SIT STILL, SEÑOR'"

a long horse-pistol in her right hand, and the weapon was pointed at his head.

"Sit still, señor," she went on. "Should you rise, I might grow excited and pull the trigger of this weapon, and much damage might be done."

"Who — er — where did you come from?" stammered Ralph.

"From my couch, in this room, señor. And now let me ask you a question. Where did the soldier boy come from?"

"I came from outside."

"Did Manuel give you permission to come in here?"

"Was he the *vaquero* who just went away?"

"Yes."

"I can't say that he did. I was tramping along and was desperately hungry. I thought I might find something to eat here, and so I came through yonder window. I did not intend to touch anything but this food."

At these words the face of the woman softened a little. She had noted before she spoke how eagerly Ralph was devouring the food he had prepared.

"Were you entirely alone, señor?"

"Why do you ask that?" returned Ralph, cautiously.

"Answer me!" And again the pistol came up on a level with his head and her momentary softness of manner vanished.

"Yes, I am alone."

"And what does such a young soldier do here all alone?"

"I — I got into trouble with some Mexican soldiers, and they started to make me a prisoner."

"The young señor is perhaps a spy, not so?"

"No, I am not a spy."

"Then how did you get into trouble?"

"I got into trouble through trying to help a Mexican girl," answered Ralph, struck by a sudden idea. Perhaps if he told about what had happened to Inez Morales, this woman might become something of a friend.

"Who was the girl, and what did you try to do?" were the next questions put.

"The girl was Inez Morales. She has an uncle, Jose Toletto, who is very cruel to her. He drove her into the river and she might have been drowned, had it not been for my brother, a friend of mine, and myself. We rescued her, and then started to find this Jose Toletto and a bad fellow called Juan the Giant —"

The woman gave a sudden cry and the pistol dropped to her side.

"Did you say Juan the Giant?" she faltered.

"I did."

"And is he in this vicinity?"

"He cannot be many miles away. He and Jose Toletto went off together. Then you know the Giant?"

"I do — to my sorrow, señor."

"He is a bad man."

"He ruined my brother Carlos. It was some years ago, in a deal of horses. Juan Badillo cheated him, and poor Carlos was so worried over his loss that he died soon after."

"I can easily believe you, for Badillo is a regular horse thief. But do you know Toletto?"

"Not very well, although we have met several times. And I have met Inez Morales. She is a sweet señorita."

There was a moment of silence, and then Ralph went on:

"May I finish the meal — even though I cannot pay for it?"

At this the woman let out a merry laugh.

"The young Yankee soldier is brave," she said. "How does he know I am not very, very angry with him?"

"Because I know you are not cruel — I can see it in your beautiful face."

The compliment told, for there are few women, especially among Mexican ladies, who do not like to be told that they are handsome. Down went the pistol behind her.

"Yes, you may eat all you wish, señor. I would not send even an enemy away hungry."

She sat down on a near-by bench and watched him curiously while he finished the meal, which he did as rapidly as possible.

What was he to do next? This was the question uppermost in Ralph's mind. Would the woman try to detain him until her husband or some others appeared? When would the *vaquero* return?

"There, that was a first-rate meal," he said, when he had finished. "I am sorry I cannot pay for it, but I have no money with me, señora. I can but give you my very best thanks," and he bowed deeply, as is the custom of that country.

"I want no pay, señor. But — but — you are going?"

"Unless you want me to stay. If I remain away longer from the American camp along the river, I may get into trouble with my superior officer."

It was a bold move and it had its proper effect.

"Then I will not detain you, señor — you are

too young a soldier to get into trouble. Sometimes they shoot soldiers for disobeying orders, do they not?"

"Yes."

"I should not wish any one shot on my account. Go, if you must — and my best wishes go with you."

She smiled on him, and, struck by a sudden impulse, Ralph stepped up to her, took her hand and kissed it, in true Mexican fashion, at which she beamed on him in a motherly kind of way. Then he leaped to the window and started to climb out. A glance to the trail beyond and he uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"What is it, señor?" she asked.

"The soldiers who are after me!"

"Indeed! That is too bad!"

Ralph was in a quandary. Four soldiers had already appeared, and there was no telling how many more were behind. He glanced out into the roadway and then at the woman.

She read what was in his mind and caught him by the shoulder.

"Answer me quickly and truly," she said, gazing into his clear eyes. "Are you a spy?"

"I am not."

"You have told me the strict truth about saving

Inez Morales and about hunting for Jose Toletto and Juan Badillo?"

"I have."

"Then come with me and I will hide you until they have gone on."

At these words Ralph's heart gave a leap of joy. He felt that in some strange, unexpected manner he had made a true friend. He turned from the window.

"Where shall I go? I place myself in your hands, señora."

She led the way to one of the sleeping-apartments.

"There is a ladder to the loft. In the centre of the loft is a trap-door. Raise that and you will find a small closet between the floor beams. Hide there, and be sure and let the clothing fall over the trap when you shut it. Hurry, señor."

No more was said, and on the instant Ralph leaped up the ladder. The loft was dark, but he soon found the trap mentioned, partly covered with a heap of old clothing. He raised the door, crawled into the closet, and let the trap fall noiselessly into place.

Hardly had this been accomplished when the soldiers came up and rapped loudly on the door below.

CHAPTER XV.

CLOSE QUARTERS

FROM his close quarters Ralph could only hear a murmur of voices, and, as the conversation was conducted in Spanish, he did not make out a word of what was said.

The closet between the floor beams was a small one, and with the trap shut down the air was cut off, so that he breathed with difficulty.

"One thing is certain, I can't stay here long," was his thought.

He did not dare to move around, for fear of making a noise, and so lay as he had first placed himself until he was so cramped in one lower limb he knew not what to do.

The murmur of voices continued, and he heard several of the soldiers enter the dwelling and tramp from room to room. Then he heard another talk, after which one of the newcomers ascended the ladder leading to the loft.

As the soldier tramped directly over where he

was in hiding, he held his breath in suspense. The soldier kicked the old clothing about and called for a light.

"It's all up with me now," thought Ralph. "He can't fail to see the trap-door if he gets a light."

The call for a light was not answered, the other soldiers being outside and at the shed. The man in the loft continued to tramp around for a moment, and then went below and outside.

Drawing a long breath of relief, Ralph took the opportunity to turn around in his narrow quarters, thus giving the doubled-up lower limb a chance to stretch out.

This brought the young soldier's hand in contact with one part of the trap-door, and his fingers brushed against an iron ring which had previously escaped his notice.

Scarcely had he made this discovery when he heard the Mexican soldiers reënter the house. They were talking as earnestly as before, and he could now hear the lady's voice also.

"They are coming up here again," he thought, and he was right. Two soldiers ascended to the loft, one carrying a smoky lantern which he had compelled the lady of the house to furnish.

The men walked over the trap several times and examined a box and a couple of barrels standing in one corner.

Then the heap of old clothing was kicked aside and one of the soldiers let out a cry.

"A trap-door!" he said, in Spanish.

"You are sure?" asked his companion.

"Yes."

"Then raise it up. The rascal may be hiding beneath."

At once one of the Mexicans reached down to pull the trap up.

Ralph heard the talk and heard the man at the trap. In sheer desperation he put several fingers of his right hand through the ring and pulled down upon it with all of his strength.

It was a fearful strain, and as the Mexican began to pull from above poor Ralph felt as if his fingers must be broken off.

But he realized what exposure might mean, — death or a long term in a Mexican prison, — and he held on with a grim determination and every muscle braced to its utmost.

The strain lasted but a few seconds.

"The trap is nailed down — I cannot move it," said the soldier.

"Then don't waste any more time here," re-

turned his companion. "I doubt if anybody could hide under this floor."

In a moment more the Mexicans moved away and Ralph heard them go below once more.

"Gracious, but that was a close shave!" he gasped.

He was almost ready to faint from the confinement, and at the risk of being caught, felt compelled to push the trap up to get a little air.

Soon he heard the Mexican soldiers going away, and a little later the woman appeared at the top of the loft ladder.

"You can come out now," she called.

"They are all gone?"

"Yes, señor."

Ralph crawled up out of the close quarters and staggered to a tiny window at one end of the loft.

"I — I was almost smothered to death!" he gasped.

"I do not doubt it. I am sorry you had to go into the hole. But it was the best I could do for you."

"You were very kind — very kind," he returned, warmly. "I won't forget it, señora. Which way did the soldiers go?"

The two went below and she pointed out the direction. It was that from whence they had come.

Feeling it would do no good to remain at the dwelling longer, Ralph bid the lady adieu once again, and then hurried off along the trail he had previously had in mind to follow.

He had not learned the lady's name, and it may be as well to state here that he never saw or heard of this unexpected friend again. Why she had befriended him was a mystery, although it was probably on account of his youthful and thoroughly honest appearance.

After such an experience Ralph was glad enough to stretch his legs in walking, and he lost no time in putting all the distance possible between himself and his enemies.

But the young soldier had been carried off farther than he had supposed, and when nightfall came he was still many miles from where the soldiers' camp had been located.

He was now so weary he could scarcely drag one limb after the other, and shortly after sunset, coming to a deserted hut sheltered among the rocks, determined to remain there overnight and rest.

The lady who had befriended him had given him some food in a bit of cloth, and of this he ate a portion. Then he stretched himself on the floor of the hut and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

Nothing came to disturb Ralph's rest, and con-

sequently he did not awaken until some time after sunrise. Then he leaped up, feeling as fresh as ever.

"Hullo! I didn't think I'd sleep so long," he cried to himself. "I couldn't have slept sounder if I had been in bed at home. Now I mustn't lose another minute in getting back to camp. I wonder what Dan and Poke will think of my absence."

He was soon on the way, having eaten the last of the food given to him. He had a long hill to climb, and at the top he felt certain that he would be able to make out the white tents of the camp at a distance. He did not know that the camp had already moved on.

Ralph was almost to the top of the hill when he found that the trail made a sharp turn to the left. He was just moving around a number of rocks when he heard voices and the clatter of half a dozen horses' hoofs. He leaped into the brush to hide, but it was too late.

"Ha! A Yankee!" came from the throat of a Mexican soldier, and on the instant Ralph was surrounded and several pistols and guns were pointed at him.

"'Tis he who escaped from the castle!" came from an officer, who was in charge of the

detachment. "Do you surrender?" he demanded, in very bad English.

"I do," answered Ralph, and as he spoke all of his high hopes of a few minutes before were dashed to the ground. In a flash he realized that the escape from the castle prison, the flight under-ground, the hiding in the summer-house and at the Mexican lady's dwelling, all had availed him nothing.

"You were a sly fox to get away so nicely," went on the Mexican officer. "By the sun! how did you accomplish it?"

"I don't think I've gotten away," said Ralph, ruefully. "If I had I wouldn't be here."

This reply made the officer smile faintly. He turned to his men, and Ralph was searched, and then the young soldier's hands were bound behind him.

Although Ralph did not know it, the Mexican detachment had been in the vicinity of Matamoras trying to obtain more of the ammunition secreted there by the Mexican government. But the United States troops on guard in the city had proved too watchful for them, and the Mexicans had been compelled to return empty-handed. Now they were bound for their mountain retreat with all speed, fearing that the hated Yankees might over-

take them and either shoot them down or make them prisoners.

The party was on horse and mule back, and Ralph was mounted on the back of one of the latter beasts of burden.

There is no necessity for going into the details of the return to the castle. The party advanced by a route which was strange to Ralph, and the castle was reached late that night. Without ceremony the prisoner was thrown into a small stone room, and there he was left to himself.

In this room, which was hardly eight feet square, and which had but one small window and that so high up that he could not reach it, Ralph spent a week. One day was exactly like another, and the week to the young soldier appeared to be a month long. Twice a day he was given food and fresh water, but that was all. Nobody came to talk to him, nor was he allowed any exercise in the open air.

"This is certainly enough to drive one crazy," was his thought, as he paced up and down the narrow cell. "I hope it doesn't continue many days longer."

On the morning of the eighth day he felt that something unusual was taking place. There was a parade of soldiers in the castle of the courtyard,

and then a guard came and flung open the door of his prison.

"We are going to move," he said in Spanish. "Come."

Ralph did not understand the words, but he understood enough to know that he was to leave the prison, and this he did willingly. Half an hour later he was marching between several guards over the mountain trails and through the passes leading to Cerro Gordo, a high mountain pass some miles west of Vera Cruz.

This journey was one Ralph never forgot. Day after day the guards and the soldiers ahead tramped on, over one high hill after another, through dense growths of chaparral and cacti, and forests of stately trees. At some places the sharp rocks were everywhere in evidence, and more than once they ran across the home of a nest of rattlesnakes that made it lively for all hands. Drinking-water was to be had, but it was of a poor quality, and once it made Ralph deathly sick. The sun was now growing warmer, and during the middle of the day beat down mercilessly upon them. But the nights in the mountains were cool, and one belated norther came close to giving the young soldier a chill.

Where he was being taken Ralph could not tell. He heard something of General Scott's proposed

landing at Vera Cruz and of what the Mexican authorities intended to do should the American commander start to bombard the seaport city, and he also heard something of the Mexican plan to fortify the pass of Cerro Gordo and other routes leading to Mexico City. But most of the talk was in Spanish, so he was never exactly certain of the information.

At last the Mexican detachment joined a body of soldiers who were in camp on the side of a high mountain. Here Ralph was thrown in with a number of other prisoners, all strangers to him. The prisoners' camp was set off by itself and a strong guard watched it constantly. And here Ralph passed many days.

CHAPTER XVI.

DAN'S UNUSUAL EXPERIENCE

As mentioned before, General Scott, on landing his forces just below Vera Cruz, lost no time in investing the city, his line of troops extending in a grand semicircle from the north shore of the town to the south shore.

The work was not without peril, for the cannon of the city and the fort on the island endeavored constantly to reach our soldiers, who were hidden behind sand-banks and growths of chaparral.

In two weeks after landing the investment of Vera Cruz was complete, and then General Scott sent in a summons to surrender.

"We will never surrender to the Yankees!" was the prompt reply.

"Perhaps not," General Scott is reported to have said. "But I imagine a few days of a hot bombardment will make you change your minds." The bombardment began immediately, not only by the forces on land, but also by the war-

vessels still riding in the harbor, and the fierce rain of shot and shell was kept up for some days.

Previous to the bombardment the command to which Dan and Poke were attached was sent out to take possession of a long low-lying sand-hill about northwest from the city. Next to this command was stationed that to which Ralph, Dwight Pellingham, and Jack Bracer belonged.

The weather had been fairly pleasant, but one evening it became dark and threatening, as if a heavy storm was close at hand.

"We're in for a soakin' to-night," observed Poke. "I'm mighty glad to say I ain't got to do guard-duty. I was out last night."

"You're certainly in luck, Poke," answered Dan. "I've got to go out."

"Is thet so? Thought you was out night afore last."

"So I was, but the guard has been shifted and I've got to go to-night again, from twelve o'clock on."

In order to be wide awake when it came time to do guard-duty, Dan retired early that evening. Consequently he was bright and fresh when he went out with the detail, at ten minutes before midnight.

He was left on what was called Post 3, extending from the edge of a sand-bank into a dense mass of brushwood backed up by a few rocks. It was far from an agreeable spot, but Dan did not complain, knowing that his task was simply part of the soldier duty he had enlisted to perform.

It had begun to rain, so as he tramped from one end of his post to the other, he wrapped his storm-cape closely around his shoulders.

"I don't believe any Mexicans are stirring this night," he thought. "They think too much of their comforts and their cigarette smoking."

Half an hour had gone by, and Dan had got thoroughly well acquainted with his post and with the two soldiers at either end of it, on the posts beyond, when a noise reached his ears which sounded unusual.

Instantly he clutched his gun and gazed ahead into the rain and darkness.

"Was that a man, an animal, or a bird?" he asked himself.

For several minutes he stood still, but the sound was not repeated, and then he resumed his tramping up and down the post.

Then came the noise again, this time closer than before. He was now in the brushwood, and he was half of a mind it was some wild animal. But

though he strained his eyes to their utmost, he could see nothing.

Again he resumed his march, and passed from one end of the post to the other.

As he came up close to a large rock, two shadowy forms loomed up behind him.

There was a quick movement, and before Dan could resist he was caught from behind and a pitch plaster was clapped over his mouth. Then a bag came down over his head, shutting out everything from view.

He had in the meantime tried to discharge his gun, but a hand caught the trigger, and in a moment the weapon was twisted from his grasp.

Feeling he must be in the hands of the enemy, who were trying to steal into the camp during the storm, perhaps to learn valuable information, Dan did his best to release himself.

But the attack had been prepared with care, and before he could scarcely move, the bag over his head was tied around his neck and his wrists were forced into a pair of hand-cuffs behind his back.

"These Mexicans certainly know how to do the trick," was his thought.

As soon as his hands were secured he was struck a blow over the head which almost stunned him and knocked him off his feet.

Then he was picked up and carried off, he knew not to where.

The journey lasted less than five minutes, and during that time Dan had all he could do to get his breath through his nose, his mouth being tightly closed by the pitch plaster, and the bag over his head being uncommonly close.

Finally he was cast upon the ground, in a hollow where the water was several inches deep.

Then a small hole was punched in the bag and a rough voice said:

"That'll give him air, I reckon."

"Don't give him too much air. He may cry out," answered another voice.

The voices were evidently disguised by the speakers, yet in some manner they sounded strangely familiar. Where had he heard them before?

The persons who had carried him to the wet spot now proceeded to bind his lower limbs together, so that walking or even crawling would be impossible.

As they worked they continued to converse in a low tone, but what was said Dan could not make out.

At last the persons moved away silently, leaving Dan where they had placed him.

The rain came down furiously now, wetting the young soldier to the skin and causing the water in the hollow to grow deeper and deeper.

Dan did not think there was any danger of drowning, but he did not relish remaining in the mud water, and so tried his best to roll himself out of the hole.

In this way he at last succeeded, bringing up against some rocks not ten feet away. This was as far as he could get, and there he remained, the furious rain pelting him as hard as ever.

As he lay a prisoner he speculated upon who had made him a prisoner. Certainly they were not Mexicans. They spoke good English, without the slightest trace of an accent.

Suddenly something in the voice of one of the speakers came to his mind. He remembered that something now.

"Sounded like Jack Bracer!" thought Dan. "And if it really was that fellow, then his companion must have been Dwight Pellingham, for the two are constantly together, although what a fop like Pellingham can find in such a coarse chap as Bracer to admire, is beyond me."

Now he felt sure of the identity of the pair, Dan began to wonder more than ever why they had made him a prisoner.

"It can't be that they are in league with the Mexicans," he reasoned. "Bracer might turn traitor, but Pellingham is too much of a coward. I wonder if they did it merely to get me into trouble with the officer of the guard?"

An hour passed, and still Dan was left to himself. In vain he struggled at his bonds; the handcuffs could neither be broken nor slipped off.

The storm had let up a bit, but now it broke forth in additional fury.

In the midst of the downpour he felt somebody beside him. The handcuffs were unlocked and withdrawn. Then the somebody withdrew as silently as he had come.

"More mystery," thought Dan.

With his hands at liberty it did not take him long to unloosen the bag tied around his neck. This done, he tore the pitch plaster from his mouth and took several deep and refreshing draughts of the cool night air.

Releasing his lower limbs came next. As he worked on the bonds he gazed sharply into the darkness around him, but could see nobody.

His gun lay close at hand, and an examination proved that nobody had tampered with the weapon.

"Well, if this don't beat the nation!" he mut-

tered. "Now, why in creation did they treat me in this fashion?"

Then of a sudden came another thought, and his face grew unusually sober.

He knew what it meant to be off his post during guard-duty time. He was in for arrest, followed probably by court martial. It might be that they would even shoot him for neglect of duty in the face of the enemy. He had heard that General Scott was unusually strict, and considered neglect of guard duty a great crime at any time, and especially when the camp lay so close to the enemy.

"There is no use of talking, I am in for it!" he groaned. "I don't believe they'll believe my story. There will be nobody at hand to prove what I say."

Nevertheless there was nothing to do but to "face the music," and this being so, the young soldier set about finding his way back into the American lines — for he felt certain he had been carried away from the camp, and not toward it.

Getting back was no easy task, for he was among tall brushwood and big rocks, and the storm of the night had washed out the camp-fires which might have guided him. He mounted a high rock and tried to locate himself, but the effort was a failure.

"I'll have to tramp around until I strike some guard," he told himself. "They couldn't have carried me very far, and if I move in a wide circle I'll be bound to fetch up against our guard line sooner or later."

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE GUARD-TENT

In an exceedingly bitter frame of mind, Dan tramped on, through the wet mesquite bushes and over the rough rocks. He was soaked to the skin, and far from comfortable physically, yet he did not think of this. His whole mind was concentrated on the probable outcome of the strange adventure.

At last he imagined he saw a form moving back and forth in the darkness. He advanced a few yards farther.

"Halt!" came the command, in a clear American voice. "Who goes there?"

"A friend," answered Dan.

"Advance and give the countersign," went on the guard, with his gun pointed at Dan's breast.

"Washington," came from Dan, promptly. Then the gun of the guard dropped and he looked at the young soldier more closely.

"Hullo, if it ain't Dan Radbury!" exclaimed the picket. "Where have you been, anyway?"

"Not very far, Woods."

"The sergeant of the guard has been looking for you," went on Woods, and shook his head in a manner that meant a good deal.

"I suppose he has been," said Dan, gloomily. "Where is he now?"

"Up at the guard-tent, I reckon. Why did you slip away? You might have known you would get caught at it," continued the picket, who knew Dan fairly well and liked him.

"I didn't slip away."

"But you've been gone."

"I was carried away."

"Cracky, you don't mean it! I didn't reckon the greasers were so close." And Woods clutched his musket tighter than usual.

"I don't believe it was the greasers, Woods."

"No?"

"I do not. A bag was put over my head and a pitch plaster over my mouth, so I couldn't yell for help."

"Humph! that's strange. You must have— Here comes Sergeant Peltry now."

As the guard finished, the officer of the pickets came into view and both Woods and Dan saluted. The sergeant frowned at the young soldier.

"Radbury, where have you been?" he demanded, sharply.

"I have been a prisoner, sir."

"Of the enemy?"

"Of my enemies, anyway; I don't know if they were Mexicans or not."

"I missed you an hour before your time was up. If you were attacked, why didn't you fire your gun?"

"I didn't get the chance," answered Dan, and then told his story in detail.

"That's a queer tale, Radbury. Do you expect me to believe it?"

"It's the truth, Sergeant Peltry, whether you believe it or not. You can feel some of that pitch around my mouth yet."

"You could easily put that on yourself. What would be the object of your enemies in tying you up and then letting you go?"

"Most likely to get me into trouble."

"Humph! They'd run a big risk. We are now at war, not in camp for the fun of it."

"I know that, sir."

"I shall have to report this matter to the colonel."

"Can I speak to him myself?"

"Not now. Perhaps you can in the morning. But now you'll go to the guard-tent with me."

Dan's heart sank within him. In all his career as a soldier he had never before been under arrest for neglect of picket duty.

"Then I may consider myself —" He could not finish.

"Under arrest? Certainly. What else did you expect? Give me your gun."

Reluctantly the young soldier passed the weapon over. Then he was marched to the guard-tent, a small circular affair, surrounded with tall and sharp-pointed stakes. Several soldiers walked around the military lockup.

"Go in there," commanded Sergeant Peltry, coldly. "And mind, I want no more nonsense from you. Let me add, I believe your story is a falsehood from beginning to end."

With a heart that felt like a lump of lead, Dan walked into the guard-tent. There was no light within, and he had taken but a few steps when he tripped over a drunken soldier who lay snoring on the ground.

"Git off o' me!" came in a growl, and some horrible swearing followed. Then the drunkard went to sleep again, and Dan took good care to give him a wide berth from that time on.

Slowly the hours wore away. Dan was very tired, but it was a long while before he fell asleep,

and then he dreamed that he was once more a prisoner and that he was sentenced to be shot. There was a report, and Dan felt a stinging sensation on the forehead.

The young soldier awoke with a start, to find Dwight Pellingham grinning at him. The dandy soldier had thrown a stone at Dan which had landed on the sleeper's forehead.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Dan, and then added: "Did you throw that stone at me?"

"I didn't throw anything," growled Pellingham. "I'm doing my guard duty, that's all. I wouldn't be here if I didn't have to be."

"You got me into a nice mess, Pellingham."

At this direct accusation the fop's face grew slightly pale.

"Me?" he stammered. "What do you mean? I haven't done anything."

"I know better."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Yes, you do."

"If you are trying to get me into trouble I'll — I'll —"

"What will you do?"

"Never mind. But you'll be sorry, remember that."

"I want to know who helped you carry me off? Was it Jack Bracer?"

"You talk in riddles. I never carried you off," went on Pellingham, but his lips trembled so he could scarcely frame the words.

"I believe you did," said Dan.

It was almost ten o'clock when the officer of the guard ordered Dan to the headquarters of the colonel of the regiment. As Dan entered he saw General Scott sitting on a camp-chair, in earnest conversation with several other military men. The famous general was dressed for battle and looked up quickly when the prisoner came in and saluted.

The story the sergeant of the guard had to relate was soon told, and the colonel of the regiment asked Dan a number of questions while General Scott looked on with interest.

"Do you suspect anybody of doing this?" asked the colonel.

"I do, sir," answered Dan.

"Yet you didn't see the parties?"

"No, sir."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"Two soldiers who are on bad terms with me."

"What are their names?"

"I would not like to say at present, sir. It is possible that I am mistaken."

"Ah!" The colonel paused. "Radbury, don't you know that this is a serious piece of business?"

"I do, sir. But I am innocent of any wrong-doing. I was attacked from behind and got no chance to give the alarm."

"Unless you can prove what you say, and that now, you will have to stand court martial."

The colonel looked at General Scott as he spoke, but the great commander said nothing, nor did his face show that he approved or disapproved of the colonel's action.

"I can't prove anything just now, sir. But if you will give me a little time—"

The colonel shook his head.

"You will have to stand trial, Radbury."

"But, sir—"

"I haven't time for any more words. Sergeant, remove the prisoner."

The colonel turned his back and began to talk to General Scott and the other military men who had come in to have a friendly chat. The sergeant of the guard motioned to Dan, and the young soldier marched from the tent.

While Dan was on his way back to the guard-tent he saw Poke hurrying across the company "street."

"Can I speak to Stover?" he asked.

"Yes, at the guard-tent," answered the sergeant.

The drunken soldier was already gone, so Dan had the guard-tent all to himself. He motioned to Poke, and soon the frontiersman came up and went in with him. Pellingham was away, having been relieved by another soldier.

"It's a downright shame, hang me ef it ain't," exclaimed Poke, after listening to Dan's story. "It's a pity ye can't spot the chaps as did the trick on ye."

"I've been thinking you might help me, Poke."

"Wall, I'm willin' enough, goodness knows. But what kin I do? Might go to General Scott and beg ye off, eh?"

"No, the general was in the colonel's tent and heard the whole story. I want you to spy on Pellingham and Bracer. Perhaps you can catch them talking of the deed and corner them that way — if they really are guilty — and I feel almost certain they are."

"Thet's the talk, Dan! I'll do it, an' git somebody else to listen, too," answered Poke.

A few words more followed, and then the frontiersman went off on a mission for one of the lieutenants. Dan sat down and gave himself up to long and bitter reflections. If he was court-martialed and found guilty, what would they do with him?

CHAPTER XVIII.

POKE PLAYS THE SPY

POKE STOVER, as we know, thought a great deal of Dan, and, when he left the guard-tent, his mind was filled with a hope that he might be able to discover some evidence which would clear the young soldier of the charge preferred against him.

"He ain't guilty o' doin' anything wrong, thet's certain," said the old frontiersman to himself. "Dan wouldn't leave his post nohow. They put up a measly job on him, an' who done it is fer me to find out."

Poke's errand was for a lieutenant named Ford, and, on returning, he found this officer sitting on a sand-bank, in the shelter of a pile of cut brush, smoking a pipe. Lieutenant Ford had been a frontiersman himself, and he and Poke were on excellent terms.

"It's all right, leftenant," said Poke, as he came up and saluted. "The wagons will be over inside o' the next two hours, so the head teamster said."

"Good enough," returned the lieutenant. "You spoke about that ammunition?"

"Yes, and he said it was in wagons 28 and 30."

"Then that's settled." The lieutenant drew a long whiff of his pipe. "Sit down, Stover, and make yourself comfortable. There is nothing more to do just at present."

"Not for you, leftenant, but there is for me."

"More work? For the captain?"

"No; for a young friend o' mine — Dan Radbury."

"The private who is under arrest?"

"The same."

"What are you going to do for him?"

"I am going to clear him of the charge against him, if it's possible, an' I think, maybe, it is."

"What can you do?"

"He has two enemies in this camp, and he thinks they are the ones who got him into this scrape. I'm going to play the spy on the pair, and see if I can't git a clue."

"If it's any of my business, who are his enemies?"

"Wall, I know I kin trust you, leftenant, so I don't mind tellin' ye. They are thet dandy, Pellingham, and Jack Bracer."

"Humph! I know the pair. Pellingham hasn't

any brains to spare, and as for Bracer, — well, I wouldn't trust him with an old pair of boots."

"Right ye are, leftenant. An' I am satisfied they are guilty."

"It won't be easy to prove it," returned Lieutenant Ford, as he refilled his pipe.

"I reckon not, but —" Poke paused, and gazed across the sand-banks to where two soldiers were walking slowly along. "Thar they go, now!"

The frontiersman was right; the pair were Dwight Pellingham and Jack Bracer. They were talking earnestly, and hardly noticed where they were going.

"Now is your chance to spy, if you want to do it," said Lieutenant Ford.

"Yes, I'll follow 'em," was the answer. "By the way, I'd like a witness — in case they talk as I expect. Will you go along? It will be a big favor."

"Certainly, I'll go, Stover; anything to oblige an old friend, and get Radbury out of his trouble, if he is blameless."

Pellingham and Bracer had passed around the end of a large sand-hill, and were now making their way to a series of rocks lying beyond a fringe of cacti. With caution, Poke Stover fol-

lowed in their footsteps, and Lieutenant Ford brought up the rear.

At length the two soldiers ahead paused near the shelter of a large rock, where a single tree shoved its trunk up amid the general barrenness.

"I'm not going any farther," Poke heard Pellingham say. "I'm dog-tired."

"'Im tired myself," replied Bracer. "But it was best to get out of camp. Too many ears around there."

"That is true," returned the dandy, nervously. "Jack, do you think they suspect us?" he went on, after a pause.

"I suppose they do, if Radbury told them about what he said to you."

"But I didn't give in to anything."

"If they haul you up for examination, you must keep a stiff upper lip."

"To be sure."

"What I want is this," continued Bracer, throwing himself down in a convenient spot. "The colonel may take it into his head to haul us up for examination separately. If he does, we must, each of us, be able to tell a straight story."

"Well, I can do that."

"You mustn't say you were with me, nor must I say that I was with you. If we do that, they may

go into some details, and trip one or the other of us up. If they ask questions, say you didn't see me that night at all, and stick to it."

"But somebody may have seen us together."

"I think not. I am going to prove that I went on guard duty part of the time, and was in my tent the balance of the time. The tent was empty, so they can't prove otherwise."

"Well, I can't say I was in the tent, for Rollison was sleeping there. He knows I was absent."

"Then say you were somewhere else — hunting firewood, or anything."

"I can say I was out looking for a wagon which a friend of mine is driving. Harry Jackson drives such a wagon, and I know him well."

"Then that will do. And remember that you must stick to what you first tell, no matter how they try to twist you up. Of course, if it comes to a court martial, Radbury will do his level best to clear himself."

"What will they do with him if he is found guilty?"

"Either put him in prison or shoot him."

At the last words Dwight Pellingham gave a shiver.

"Oh, I don't want them to shoot him! That would be carrying the game too far."

"I don't care what they do," was Jack Bracer's rough reply. "But I guess they won't shoot him. He can't ride over me. When we went into the game I expected to get him into serious trouble. It wasn't any fun to capture him in that howling storm and tie him up and carry him off."

"It's a wonder that pitch plaster didn't smother him."

"Oh, he's tough, Pelly, — a good deal tougher than a city chap like you."

"That must be it."

So the talk ran on. Poke and Lieutenant Ford listened with great interest to every word that was said.

"They are guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt," whispered the lieutenant.

"They ought to have their necks wrung for 'em!" growled the old frontiersman.

"What do you want to do next?"

Poke scratched his head.

"I don't know exactly. Can't I go to the colonel an' have 'em arrested on the spot?"

"Certainly, although that may not be advisable. Why not keep our eyes on them until Radbury is about to be tried? They may be up to even worse doings."

"Jest as you say, leftenant."

"We can clear Radbury at any time, and that's the main point. But we want to get all the evidence we can against these fellows, so that we can do them full justice when we strike."

Pellingham and Bracer were now moving away, and Poke and the lieutenant took good care that they should not be seen by the disreputable pair.

Hardly had the evil-doers gone when there came a bugle-call, followed by the rolling of drums. A moment later came a booming of half a dozen cannon located on a hill not far away. This discharge was answered by a similar booming from the city of Vera Cruz.

"Hullo, we've got to get back to quarters!" cried Lieutenant Ford, leaping to his feet. "The bombardment from this end has started again!"

"Right ye are!" returned the old frontiersman. "An' I reckon as how it's going to be heavy," he added, as the enemy's guns spoke up again.

"Well, that's what we've been waiting for, Stover. Come on!"

Side by side they ran back to camp, taking care to go by a different route than that pursued by Pellingham and Bracer.

In the camp all was activity, and Poke had so many duties to perform that, for the time being, Dan was forgotten. The old frontiersman ran to

join his company, and soon he was marching forth toward a breastworks quarter of a mile to the eastward.

"Do your best to-day, boys!" shouted the captain. "If you take a shot, make it tell!"

"We will!" came back the cry.

And then the company went forward on the double-quick, ready to do its duty, no matter what might be the consequences.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RESULT OF CANNON FIRE

THE bombardment of Vera Cruz was indeed on in all of its power, and for hours shot and shell rained down hotly within the city's walls. Building after building was knocked to pieces, and the streets were strewn with the dead and the dying.

But the Mexicans were stout of heart and they returned the fire with vigor, so that several American guns were rendered next to useless, and a number of gunners were either killed or wounded.

Often a shot would strike the sand with tremendous force, scattering it like so much hail. Poke Stover got a dose of this, and it cut him severely on the cheek, while it deprived him of a portion of his hair.

"By gopher!" he exclaimed, as he wiped the blood from his wounds. "Thet's putty bad an' no mistake! Wish I could git back at ye!" And he shook his fist at the city in the distance.

But "getting back" at the city with anything less than a cannon was impossible, and all the soldiers could do was to "lay low" and watch for a possible sortie on the part of the Mexicans. But this did not take place, for the Mexicans knew they were surrounded by an enemy who was only too willing to do battle at close range.

At length there came a lull, welcome to both sides, and for two hours the United States soldiers imagined that the city was going to surrender. As a matter of fact the Mexican officials did hold a consultation, but nothing came of it. Then the cannonading was renewed with increased vigor for half an hour more, when it gradually subsided, dying out altogether at sundown.

"All for nothing," remarked one soldier to Poke, on the march back to camp.

"Don't know about thet," said the frontiersman. "Reckon as how them greasers caught it putty hot-like. An' if they did, they may be willing to come to terms by to-morrow morning."

"They won't surrender until they are thoroughly whipped. They know too well what it means — that General Scott will immediately march on the City of Mexico itself."

"Vera Cruz will surrender inside o' a week — jest you wait an' see if I ain't right," said Poke.

Lying behind the breastworks had been very tiresome, and when he got back to camp Poke felt inclined to rest; but some ammunition-wagons were still missing, and he was sent off at once after them. So he got no chance to tell Dan of what he had heard, nor did he talk further with Lieutenant Ford.

The chase after the ammunition-wagon lasted until long after midnight, and was the cause of Poke getting into a laughable, if not a serious, predicament. He was on horseback, and had just come up to the wagons when his horse went down into a hole, almost breaking a leg.

"Whoa thar!" he cried, and reined up the steed. "By gosh! thet's a nasty hole. Ef ye don't look out — Oh! oh! oh!"

Poke gave a start and then began to slap right and left, and with good reason. The hole was nothing less than a hornet's nest, and let me say right here that the Mexican hornet is about the most vicious in creation.

Up came the pests in a swarm, thoroughly enraged at having their home so unceremoniously invaded. Some bit Poke on the hands and others alighted on his face, still sore from the sand cuts.

Slap! slap! slap! went the old frontiersman's hands, while he dodged his head right and left.

POKE'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE MEXICAN HORNETS

Then the hornets attacked the horse, and in a twinkle the steed began to kick and plunge, and then set off on a dead gallop into the mesquite brush.

It was a wild ride, and only by pure good luck did Poke stick in the saddle while the horse plunged and snorted. The steed travelled a good quarter of a mile before he could be brought to a halt.

"Whoa thar!" Poke kept on calling, but the horse paid no heed. He wanted to get clear of those hornets and would have travelled all the way to the State of Texas to do it if necessary.

But at last he stopped, and Poke killed the last of the pests with vigorous slaps of his broad palm. The frontiersman's nose was stung and swollen and presented a comical appearance when he finally got to where he had wanted to go.

"Must have been drinking heavily," said one teamster, with a wink.

"Drinkin'?" roared Poke. "Not much! It was hornets, drat 'em!"

"Step into one of them air holes?"

"Yes."

"Gosh! I know 'em! They air terrors an' no error!"

"Where's wagon 16?" demanded Poke, getting down to business.

"Broke an axle two hours ago, comin' across yonder gully."

"The colonel wants that ammunition. Better put it in another wagon and send it along."

"That's what I am doing," replied the teamster.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Poke got back to his tent. He was very tired and knew it would be useless to try to see Dan at that time of the night. He covered his hornet stings with mud — that being both a handy and a good remedy — and lay down to sleep, and did not awaken until time for roll-call.

There was but little doing after roll-call, and in the middle of the forenoon Poke received permission to call upon Dan in the guard-tent. He found the young soldier seated on the ground in anything but a happy mood. Dan had heard the bombardment but had not learned any of the particulars.

"Got good news fer ye," said Poke, as he sat down beside the young soldier. He spoke in a whisper, so that the guard pacing back and forth in front of the doorway might not hear.

At once Dan's eyes brightened.

"Good news, Poke? Oh, tell me what it is!"

"I've found 'em out!"

"Who? Pellingham and Bracer?"

"Yes."

"Then they are guilty, as I suspected?"

"They are, Dan. They are the biggest villains unhung," went on the old frontiersman, earnestly.

"How did you manage it?" and now Dan was all attention.

In his own peculiar way Poke Stover told his story in detail, to which Dan listened closely. When he had finished there was a smile on the young soldier's face.

"I told you so!" he exclaimed. "Oh, how glad I am that you followed them — and that you took Lieutenant Ford along."

"Yes, I'm glad I took the leftenant myself, Dan. His testimony will clear you sure. If I had gone alone, perhaps they wouldn't have taken my word — seein' as how I'm your close friend."

"That is true. If you testified alone, Pellingham and Bracer would be sure to say it was a plot hatched up between us to free me. But they won't dare say that against Lieutenant Ford — he is too popular, and everybody knows he is as straight as a string."

"True to the dot, Dan. Yes, the leftenant is the one to clear ye — not but what I mean to have my say, too, when the time comes."

"To be sure. It will make the case so much

stronger against the rascals. Won't they be surprised when they learn how the tables have been turned on them!"

"When is that court martial to take place?"

"To-morrow morning I believe."

"Then we had better not say anything until then."

"As you and the lieutenant think best, Poke. I know you will do your best for me," added Dan, gratefully, and he gave Poke's hand a squeeze.

"Phew! Let up! Oh!" roared the old frontiersman, and swung the hand around in pain.

"Oh, Poke, I didn't want to hurt you. I forgot all about the hornet stings," cried Dan. "Why don't you put something on them?"

"Did put mud on. They don't hurt any more — exceptin' when you squeeze 'em."

The guard now appeared at the doorway.

"What's the row here?" he demanded.

"Nothin'," answered Poke.

"Thought I heard you yell."

"I squeezed his hand, and he's been stung by hornets," explained Dan.

"If you make any more noise like that he'll have to go," said the guard, and with this warning withdrew.

A talk lasting ten minutes followed, and then,

his time for the interview being up, Poke arose to leave the guard-tent.

"I'm very happy over this," said Dan, on parting with his friend. "I have hardly slept a wink through thinking of what would happen to me if they found me guilty at the court martial."

"Well, you're all right now," concluded Poke.

At noon came the regular daily drill, and then Poke went on guard duty. This lasted four hours, when he returned again to his tent.

As he approached, he heard some soldiers talking of the men who had been killed or wounded during the last bombardment and caught the name of Lieutenant Ford.

"What about Leftenant Ford?" he demanded, anxiously.

"He was badly wounded," was the reply, which caused the old frontiersman's heart to sink.

"Wounded, eh? And where is he?"

"Over in yonder hospital tent." The speaker pointed with his hand. "A bit of shell hit him in the back of the head, and he has been unconscious ever since."

CHAPTER XX.

A HEARING BEFORE GENERAL SCOTT

POKE STOVER was much dismayed by the news that Lieutenant Ford had been seriously injured during the bombardment. Like a flash it came to him that if the lieutenant could not testify in Dan's behalf, matters might prove very serious for the young soldier.

Without delay he walked over to the hospital where the officer was confined. At the doorway the guard stopped him.

"I wish to know about Leftenant Ford," said the old frontiersman. "Is he badly hurt?"

"He is. The head surgeon don't think he'll get over it."

"Do you suppose I can speak to the surgeon a minute? It's important."

"I don't know. I'll pass the word along."

This was done; and soon word came back that the surgeon would see Stover in the medicine tent. The frontiersman had to wait quarter of an hour here ere the medical man showed himself.

In a few brief words Poke explained the situation.

"It's rough on Radbury," returned the medical man. "But Lieutenant Ford won't be able to appear at the court martial, nor can he give any testimony here. He's unconscious, and we'll do well to save his life."

"And if he does recover, how long will it take — I mean before he can talk?"

"That is hard to say — perhaps two or three weeks, unless he has a bad attack of fever."

This was all the satisfaction Poke could get from the head surgeon, and he thanked the medical man for his kindness and withdrew. His face was exceedingly sober as he went to his tent.

It was not long before he learned that Dan was to have only another informal hearing on the following morning. Hopeful of getting more testimony against Pellingham and Bracer, the old frontiersman watched them closely.

But this was useless. The evil-doers kept apart purposely, and not a word was dropped by either, in Poke's hearing, concerning the plot against Dan.

Once when Poke was close to where Bracer was sitting, smoking a pipe and cutting a stick with his knife, the rascal looked up suddenly and scowled darkly.

"Say!" he exclaimed, "I want to talk to you."

"Fire away," returned the old frontiersman, laconically.

"What makes you hang around me so much?"

"Do you think I'm hanging around?"

"I do."

"Reckon I have a right to walk where I please in this camp."

"Ain't got no right to spy on me."

"Don't you think you need spying on, Bracer?"

"Me? What for?"

"For the trick you played on Dan Radbury."

At this Jack Bracer leaped to his feet.

"See here, I won't stand this," he blustered.

"Then sit down ag'in," answered Poke, coolly.

"You ain't got no right to talk to me in this fashion."

"I've got a right to tell the truth, Bracer."

"But you ain't tellin' it when you say I played a trick on Radbury. I ain't been near him for a long time, and he knows it."

"You and Pellingham played that trick on him the night he was on picket-duty, and I'm going to prove it."

"How are you goin' to prove it? You wasn't —" Bracer was going to say, "You wasn't there," but he stopped himself.

"I wasn't what?" demanded the old frontiersman.

"Never mind. You can't hatch up a game on me, that's all. I can prove where I was that night."

How long this wordy war would have kept up it is hard to say. Poke was so angry he felt like leaping on the rascal and giving him a sound thrashing. But just then Bracer was called away to do picket duty, so the pair were compelled to separate.

In the meantime Dan was having anything but a happy time of it. The guard-tent was not large, and there were now three prisoners besides himself, one who was drunk, one who had started a fierce hand-to-hand fight with the cook of his company for getting some burnt meat, and one who was suffering from an acute spell of homesickness.

The last named case was truly pitiable and was not a rarity. The soldier was young, — not over twenty-two, —and had never before been away from his country home, which was in Pennsylvania. The spell of homesickness had come on him the day before, and he had announced to all his friends that he was going home to see his father and mother whether his superior officer would let him

go or not. He had been arrested on trying to walk away out of the lines, and now he sat on a box, wringing his hands and talking to himself.

"I want to go home, I tell you," he murmured. "I want to see home and my father and mother. I'll come back again if only you'll let me see them, just for one day. I'm sick all over, wanting to see them." And thus he kept on, until the words fairly made Dan's ears ache. Dan had heard of such cases before, and had even heard of one soldier who had shot himself because he could not get a furlough to go and see his wife, whom he had not visited for two years.

"See here, Hallett," he said, kindly, sitting down by the man and taking his hand. "I wouldn't go on so. Brace up and be a man. Perhaps they'll let you go later on."

But Hallett shook his head. "I want to go now," he murmured. "I can't wait. If only they'll let me go now I'll come right back, sure. I only want to spend one night home. Wasn't you ever homesick?"

"Indeed, yes. But not lately. The spells used to come over me when I was down on the Rio Grande under Taylor. Once I felt like running away, but I worked the spell off by going and chopping wood. I chopped until I could scarcely

stand, and then I was glad enough to lie down and go to sleep, and the next morning the spell was gone."

At these words Hallett looked more hopeful. "How many cords did you chop up?"

"I don't know — but it was a big pile, I can tell you that, and I sweat like all creation."

"Hang me if I don't go to work!" the homesick man exclaimed, and ran to the door of the tent. He called for the sergeant of the guard and told that officer he wanted hard work to do. "Want to work off this spell of homesickness."

"Reckon you want to run away," said the sergeant, cautiously.

"You can watch me. Only make me work hard. Radbury says that's a cure, and I want to be cured, or I'll do something desperate."

"It is a cure," said the sergeant. "Come with me."

He took the soldier away and set him to work digging a long trench around the colonel's headquarters. Three soldiers were set to watch the homesick man, and the way in which he pitched in was truly astonishing and soon collected a crowd of sightseers. For five hours Hallett worked without stopping, and then he fell exhausted. He was restored and put to bed, and sure enough, in the

morning his spell of homesickness was past. It may be added here that not long after that he was wounded in the leg and invalided home, and by the time he was well again the war was at an end.

Dan wondered why he did not get word from Poke, and also from Lieutenant Ford, and the evening and night proved long and tedious to him. During the darkness it rained heavily, and this added to his misery.

At nine o'clock in the morning he was called into the general's tent for a hearing. This was before Scott himself, and the general listened calmly to what he had to say.

"It is a most unusual story," said Scott. "Call private Stover and Lieutenant Ford."

"Lieutenant Ford is in the hospital," was the announcement from the officer who had brought Dan in.

"What is the trouble?"

"He was hit with a piece of shell and is in a critical condition. He has not been conscious since he was struck down."

This news filled Dan with dismay, and he hardly brightened when Poke came forward and saluted. General Scott questioned the old frontiersman closely.

A little while later Pellingham and Bracer were ordered to appear. The dandy came in looking very nervous, while Bracer had a set expression far from pleasant.

"Pellingham and Bracer, Radbury charged you with carrying him off on the night he was absent from his post on the picket-line," said General Scott. "Pellingham, you may speak first. What have you to say?"

"I say it isn't so."

"You deny the charge totally?"

"I do, sir."

"What have you to say, Bracer?"

"This is a total surprise to me," was the man's cold answer. "I never went near Radbury on that night. I was in my tent."

"He doesn't tell the truth, general!" burst out Poke, unable to contain his anger. "I heard him talk the thing over with Pellingham. If Lieutenant Ford was here he'd prove it, too."

General Scott put up his hand for silence. "I have heard your story, Stover," he said. "I am now questioning Bracer."

"It's a plot hatched up to git me into trouble," went on Bracer. "I admit I'm no friend of Radbury, but I didn't do this thing, and I don't think Pellingham did it either. Radbury used to be a

sport before he joined the army, and used to know lots of Mexican gamblers. I think he slipped away to meet some of his old friends down around Vera Cruz," added Bracer, significantly.

CHAPTER XXI.

DAN'S QUICK MOVE

DAN was as much surprised as anybody at Bracer's words.

"It is false, every word of it!" he cried, as soon as he could speak. "I never gambled, and I never had any such friends as he mentions."

"This is plainly a case of contradictory evidence," said General Scott, after a painful pause. "There are two against two. I think I will have to let the matter drop until I can hear from Lieutenant Ford. Stover, Pellingham, and Bracer may retire."

The three mentioned saluted and marched from the headquarters. Then General Scott turned to Dan.

"Radbury, if I give you your liberty for the present, what will you do?" he asked, in a voice that was almost friendly.

"Do my whole duty as a soldier, sir," was the quick reply. "I have always tried to do that, and I always will try to do it."

"Then you can join your company once more, and we will let this matter drop until Lieutenant Ford recovers sufficiently to give his testimony."

"Thank you, general, for your kindness. I am willing to stand by what Lieutenant Ford may say."

There was a pause, but General Scott said no more, and saluting, Dan marched out after the others. On the parade-ground he was joined by Poke. In the meantime Pellingham and Bracer had disappeared.

"I'm on parole until Lieutenant Ford can testify," said the young soldier, in reply to his old friend's anxious inquiry.

"Good enough, Dan. If the leftenant recovers, you're as good as cleared."

"Exactly, and by the same token, as McManus would say, Pellingham and Bracer will be found guilty."

"We'll have to watch 'em closely, Dan. They are boiling mad — at least Bracer is. Pellingham is too much of a coward to be a big villain."

"I think they are as much down on you now as they are on me, Poke."

"I suppose thet's so. Well, I ain't afraid o' 'em. If they don't keep their distance somebody will git a broken head — and it won't be me,

nuther!" And the old frontiersman shook his head determinedly.

Vera Cruz had now been under fire for six days, and the bombardment was destined to continue two days longer ere the city should capitulate. So far over fifty houses and other buildings had been smashed by our guns and several hundred lives had been lost. Now the bombardment broke forth with renewed fury, and all day long the hail of death rained down on the city, driving soldiers and citizens from one shelter to another. Women and children fled to cellars and holes in the ground, but even this did not always protect them. In one instance a shell burst into a cellar by way of an open window, and through this six lives were lost. In another case a cannon-ball found its way into a well, and dropping on the head of an old woman, cracked her skull like an egg-shell. It was a time to "try men's souls," and the defenders of the doomed city must be given all credit for the brave manner in which they undertook their duty.

Out on the city walls the scenes were both thrilling and tragic. In one instance four Mexican gunners were shot down one after another while trying to fire off a cannon, and just after another gunner discharged the piece, a cannon-ball from our lines hit the Mexican weapon and knocked

it apart. Once a company of Mexican soldiers were crossing a bridge from one part of the wall to another, when a shell came down between the men, killing and wounding nine of them. Thus the work of carnage went on.

But as said before, for the privates in our ranks there was but little to do, although the commands were held in readiness, should the Mexicans in Vera Cruz become desperate and attempt to break out and flee toward Mexico City.

Late that afternoon found Poke in the trenches as before, on the alert for any movement which might be ordered. Not far away was Jack Bracer, also on duty. Slightly to the rear was Dan, likewise on guard.

Bracer did not know that Dan was in the vicinity. His gaze was fixed on Poke and it was easy to see that he was in an ugly frame of mind. Without appearing to do so he gradually drew closer to the old frontiersman.

"I'll wager he is up to no good," said Dan to himself. "He is going to get square on Poke if he can."

The noise of the bombardment was now terrific, and several shells had already fallen in that vicinity, one of which threw a cloud of dust in the young soldier's face.

When he had cleared his eyes, Dan saw that Jack Bracer was closer than ever to Poke. He had his gun in hand, and now the piece was levelled at the old frontiersman's head!

"My stars! He can't be wanting to shoot Poke in cold blood!" muttered Dan, and leaped along the trench in the rear of the rascal. Looking around hastily, he saw that no other soldiers were just then in sight.

Bracer had dropped his gun once more and was looking skyward and toward Vera Cruz. Evidently he was watching for some shell that might land in that vicinity and explode. Then he would fire his gun, and if Poke was struck he would blame the shell for the deed. He was a good shot and could easily hit Poke in the neck without allowing the bullet to remain in the frontiersman's body.

At last, when Dan was still several yards to the rear, a shell came whining along, to fall not over a hundred feet from where Poke was crouching. As quick as a flash Bracer's gun came up again and the rascal pulled the trigger.

Had the bullet gone as intended, Poke would undoubtedly have received an ugly, if not a fatal wound in the neck. But on the instant the trigger came down Dan reached over and knocked the gun-barrel up, and the bullet passed into the air.

"You villain!" cried the young soldier, and without waiting to think twice, hit Bracer in the face, a blow that loosened two teeth and made the man fall flat.

Before Bracer could recover, Poke turned around, for he had caught Dan's words. He came running up, gun in hand.

"Did he attack ye?" he questioned.

"No, but he was going to shoot you," answered Dan.

"Me?"

"Yes. He fired on you just after that shell came down. But I knocked up the gun-barrel, so the bullet went over your head."

"It ain't so!" spluttered Bracer, crawling to his feet. "I didn't fire at Stover at all."

"You did — your musket is still smoking."

"I — I aimed at the bushes over yonder. I — I thought I saw a Mexican sharpshooter there," went on the rascal, lamely.

"I believe Dan!" roared Poke, savagely. "An' fer two pins I'd put a ball through ye, Bracer. Ye ain't fit to live, consarn ye!" And he raised his own weapon threateningly.

"Don't! don't!" screamed Bracer, falling on his knees. "I swear I didn't mean to hit you. It's all a mistake. Please don't shoot me!"

He held up his hands pleadingly, and the old frontiersman lowered his musket. But there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes.

"I wouldn't shoot him," said Dan. "Let the colonel take hold of the case.

"What can ye do, lad? Bracer here will say that it's only another plot against him."

"Never mind, Poke. If you shoot him they will arrest you, — and nobody will take my word, now," added Dan, bitterly.

"I'm going back to camp; I'm sick," announced Bracer, suddenly, and without waiting for more words he hurried away.

The evil-doer was thoroughly alarmed, for he was afraid Poke might kill him on the spot. When he reached camp he began to stagger, and told an officer that the sun had affected his head. He was sent to the doctor, and soon after this the medical man gave him a cot in the hospital.

While in the hospital Bracer felt safe from any attack Poke might contemplate, but this feeling of security soon gave way to a new fear.

From one of the attendants whom he questioned he learned that Lieutenant Ford had taken a rapid turn for the better, and the surgeon in charge of the officer promised a complete recovery in the near future. More than this, while only half con-

scious, the lieutenant had talked in a rambling fashion of what he and Poke had overheard of the talk between Bracer and Pellingham.

"What Stover said at the hearing must be true," said Bracer, to himself, with something of an inward groan. "And if it is true, I've got myself in the biggest kind of a hole, and so has Pellingham. More than likely Pelly will break down when he is cornered, and of course he'll try to lay all the blame on me. Reckon the best thing I can do is to leave the army the first chance I get, and tell nobody where I am going. The place is getting too hot to hold me."

And then he set about perfecting his plans for deserting.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE STREETS OF VERA CRUZ

DESPITE the cloud hanging over him, Dan felt much lighter in heart after Bracer was disposed of and he heard the fellow was in the hospital.

"I think he'll be more careful in the future," said the young soldier.

He noticed that Dwight Pellingham kept his distance and even tried to get out of sight.

The truth was, Pellingham was growing more scared every minute, fearing Lieutenant Ford would recover and expose him.

"If only I was back home again!" the fop told himself, over and over again. "What a fool I was to join the army!"

On the last day of the bombardment of Vera Cruz, the command to which Dan was assigned moved down to the edge of the gulf, to protect several war-ships landing men and ammunition.

The task was a perilous one, for the Mexicans had the spot covered with two of their heaviest

guns, and it was only the poor aim of the gunners that kept our soldiers comparatively safe.

General Scott was anxious to capture Vera Cruz without the loss of any more time. As said before, the city lay on the sandy plain, with the mountains far behind it, and this was an excellent spot for fevers and other sicknesses. To keep troops there for any length of time would be very unwise, so the cry was, "Capture Vera Cruz and then take at once to the higher ground leading to Mexico City."

The noise of the bombardment was deafening, and shot and shell fell again in all directions. But our soldiers did their duty nobly, Dan with the others, and Poke not far away.

A boat load of soldiers were just landing on the beach when a shell came in that direction, striking the sand a hundred and fifty feet away and rolling toward the boat load. The fuse was burning and it looked as if the shell would explode in less than a second more. It rolled up to the edge of a pile of ammunition and there came to a stop.

"Look out!" was the cry, and while some soldiers fled, others threw themselves flat.

The shell came to within two feet of where Dan stood, and for just the fraction of a second the young soldier was too paralyzed to budge an inch,

he having a swift vision of the horrible thing exploding and tearing him into a hundred pieces.

Then, by instinct more than reason, he put out his foot and gave the shell one swift kick which sent it rolling into the waters of the gulf. This done, he fell flat, expecting the thing to go off anyway, since the fuse had burnt itself to the inside.

But several seconds passed and the shell failed to go off. Dan gradually raised his head and looked into the running waves. The shell was out of sight. A minute went by.

"It — it's gone!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"You are right, Radbury," came from a soldier standing near. "By Jove! I expected we'd all be blown to bits!"

"So did I."

"It was a brave thing to do."

"Sure an' it was brave," came from Corporal Tim McManus, who was also near. "It's Dan that's a brave b'y, ivery inch av him!" And he clapped the young soldier on the back.

Soon the captain of the command hurried up and was told of what Dan had done.

"You ran a big risk, Radbury," he said, "It was indeed brave. If the shell had gone off it would have played the Old Harry with this ammunition. Boys, you must cart it farther away with-

out delay." And this was done, and soon the command was once more out of range of the Mexican guns.

Dwight Pellingham had viewed the affair from a distance, and it made him feel sore to see the soldiers cluster around Dan and praise him for what he had done.

"He always comes out on top," he mused, dismally. "And I come out at the bottom. It's mighty queer. I spend three times as much money as he does, too." Dwight had still to learn that money is not everything in this world.

At last the fighting came to an end, and the Mexican commander within the city sent word that he was willing to make terms. Vera Cruz had been literally torn up from end to end, and the wreckage in the highways was enough to turn the strongest heart to sadness. Boys and girls had suffered as well as the older persons, and one of the most touching sights Dan saw when the troops marched through the gate and into Vera Cruz, were the bodies of a brother and a sister who were found, killed by a cannon-ball, while carrying a bucket of water across a courtyard. In another spot a Mexican woman was found slain in her home by a shell, a baby clasped tightly in her arms.

"It's more than sickening," whispered Dan to Poke. "Oh, why must men fight at all?"

"It's in 'em, that's why," returned the old frontiersman. "Been in 'em ever since Cain killed Abel, I reckon. But I allow as how big nations ought to settle disputes without slaughterin' folks like this."

The Mexican army surrendered on the plain before the city, and then our troops marched within the walls and took possession of the various public buildings. The command to which Dan belonged was stationed in a long hall which had once been something of a public market.

"I wonder if we'll find any trace here of Jose Toletto and Juan the Giant," remarked Dan to Poke, after the duty for the day was done and they were taking it easy in the wide casement of a low window.

"Might take a hunt around. It wouldn't be strange fer 'em to come this way."

It was not without considerable trouble that Dan and Poke obtained permission to make a hunt for Toletto and Badillo. They took with them an old Mexican who could talk for them, for in Vera Cruz English was almost unknown.

From one locality they passed to another. So far no trace of the evil-doers had been found, and

at the end of two hours Dan was about ready to give up the hunt.

"They must have gone elsewhere," he said to his companions.

"We try de Casa Amorant," said the Mexican guide. "Dat is de great place for de hoss dealers," and they walked to the resort mentioned, a low drinking-place.

There was just now little doing in the resort and the proprietor readily consented to tell all he knew. Yes, he had seen Jose Toletto just before the bombardment, and Toletto had had a stranger with him, a big fellow called Juan.

"We are on the right track at last," cried Dan, his face brightening. "Can you tell us what became of the men?"

When this question was translated to the landlord he shook his head.

"They leave town," he said, in Spanish. "They went on horseback."

"Alone?"

"No, they went with a horse dealer called Jumbell. All those at the gates know Jumbell, and they will know something of him and those who were with him."

"Well, that's something learned," said Dan.

"Let us visit the various gates and see if we can learn more."

Poke was willing and they set off immediately, the guide taking them by the most direct route. This rendered it necessary to pass through more than one street which was little better than an alley, with dirty houses set close together on either side.

It was not to be supposed that the Mexicans in the city would prove very hospitable to those who had conquered them, yet those in the public places treated the soldiers fairly well. But here in the byways it was different, and more than once Dan saw a pair of ugly eyes dart bitter hatred at them as they progressed.

"We want to look out for treachery," he whispered to the old frontiersman. "These people would think it no crime to butcher a couple of Yankee soldiers."

"Right you are, Dan," was the equally guarded answer. "Reckon as how we should have told that Mexican to keep to the public streets."

"Let us tell him now."

"No, wait until we are out of this hole. We don't want to excite suspicion. If you show you are scared, they may pounce on you in a minit."

This was good advice, and so nothing was said to the guide. Yet as they went forward each kept his hand on his gun, ready to use it at once should the occasion arise.

Beyond them was a turn in the alley, and here were located two drinking-places of the vilest description. A score of dirty men and women were congregated at the entrances, and they started to hiss the moment our friends showed themselves.

"Stop! We won't go that way," cried Dan, to the guide, in a low voice.

At this the Mexican shrugged his shoulders.

"I think the Yankees brave," he said, with a suggestive look in his dark eyes.

"We are brave, but we ain't fools," came from Poke. "Show us another way out o' this hole,— an' be quick about it."

"There is a large street just beyond the turn," answered the Mexican.

As he spoke he pointed with his hand. They looked in the direction, and as quick as a flash the Mexican darted into a near-by doorway and disappeared.

"He has left us!" ejaculated Dan. "He has played us a trick!"

"Here comes that crowd down on us!" came

from Poke. "And another crowd is coming from behind. Dan, my lad, we are hemmed in. It looks like we'd have to fight for it, sure, an' fight hard!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

DWIGHT PELLINGHAM'S CONFESSION

DAN did not learn until long after that the Mexican had indeed played them a trick, and that in a manner least suspected by himself and Poke Stover.

At the Casa Amorant the so-styled guide had seen a comrade whom he could trust, and he had immediately despatched this fellow to the present neighborhood with word that he was coming with two American soldiers who carried with them more or less silver, — for he had seen both Dan and Poke counting over their pocket money.

To have brought two hated Yankees to grief would have been joy enough to the frequenters of the two resorts, but to catch a pair who might have the price of considerable liquor in their possession was hailed with keen satisfaction.

"We will show them they have no right in Vera Cruz!" said a leader called Beppo. "We will teach them a lesson."

"THEY DARTED INTO THE OPEN DOORWAY"

"Shoot them down!" cried another.

"No, no! do not shoot them," put in a third. "Knife them. It is not so loud, and therefore safer."

"Matello is right; knife them," came from several others, and then the wretched women took up the refrain:

"Knife them! Knife the dogs of *Americanos!*"

As the crowd came closer, Dan and Poke heard the words distinctly, and understood enough to know that the Mexicans intended, if possible, to kill them.

"We can't fight them from the front and the rear too," said Dan, in reply to Poke's words.

"There is a doorway opposite. Let us enter that house."

Without stopping to think twice, they dashed across the narrow alleyway. As they did so a stone came crashing down from a flat roof, grazing the young soldier's shoulder.

He looked up and saw a man peering down at them. He was about to fire when Poke caught his arm.

"Might need the shot later on," said the old frontiersman. "In ye go."

They darted into the open doorway and to a

dark room beyond. There was a heavy door and this they closed. But the door could not be locked.

"What want you here?" came in Spanish and in the shrill voice of a woman, and of a sudden she flew at Poke and caught him by the beard and the hair.

She was not very strong, and he threw her off with ease and then darted through the room to an open court in the rear. Dan followed, and in the light both paused once more.

"Which way now?" asked the young soldier, as they threw quick glances in half a dozen directions.

"Follow me," answered the old frontiersman.

He had noted an open window on the opposite side of the courtyard, with another window leading to a street running parallel to the alleyway. Soon he was at the window, and he leaped into another room, almost as dark as the first, but much larger.

Crack! went a pistol, and a bullet whistled past their heads. Where the shot had come from, they could not tell.

"It's getting mighty hot for us!" muttered Dan.

"I see him," answered Poke, as he turned back. He had caught sight, through the window, of the

treacherous guide on the top of the house just left. "Reckon I'll plug you," he added.

He took quick aim and fired, and they saw the Mexican drop, badly, if not fatally, wounded. As the shot rang out, a yell arose from those in pursuit, and now half a dozen Mexicans burst into view, armed with pistols, knives, and clubs. Another shot was fired at them, but this buried itself in the framework of the window.

Several steps landed Dan at the window overlooking the highway just mentioned. Here he made a discovery that sent a chill down his backbone. The window was barred.

"We are locked in!" he ejaculated.

"Try those bars," cried Poke. "They don't look overly strong."

Dan caught at a bar, and pulled with all of his strength. It began to loosen in the mortar, and, when Poke also caught hold, the bar came out, sending the crumbling mortar in all directions. They served a second bar in similar fashion. The hole was now large enough for them to slip through.

"Out you go, an' be quick!" panted Poke. "They are on our heels!"

There was no time to argue, and Dan leaped forth, and the old frontiersman followed. Soon

they were running along the highway. Nobody came to stop them, and, inside of five minutes, they reached a street where they felt they would be safe. Then they dropped into a walk.

"Gracious, but that was an experience I wouldn't want to repeat!" gasped Dan, when he could get back his breath. "They were after us like a pack of wolves."

"They ought to be shot down, every consarned one o' 'em," came from the old frontiersman.

"Do you think we had better report this to headquarters, Poke?"

"Certainly. If we let it pass, these wolves will git bolder an' bolder."

"But you know the cloud I am under already, Poke. Will they believe me?"

"Whether they'll believe you or not, they've got to believe me," snorted the old frontiersman.

They asked their way back to headquarters, and here sought out their captain, and told their story.

"It was a foolish move to make, since we have but just taken possession," said the captain. "Still, I'll look into the affair." And he did, so effectually that the whole neighborhood where the trouble had occurred was put under strict guard, and the low drinking resorts were closed up, and the proprietors placed under arrest.

It was not until a day later that Dan and Poke got the opportunity of making further inquiries concerning Jose Toletto and Juan the Giant, and then, from one of the gatekeepers of the town, they learned that the tall man and Toletto had left Vera Cruz the day before General Scott's army had arrived, and that Toletto had said something about going to Mexico City to claim some money that was coming to him through the death of a relative.

"The rascal!" said Dan, on hearing this. "He thinks Inez Morales was drowned, and he is going to get her money. Won't he be surprised when he learns she is still alive!"

"He must certainly be a bad one, or he wouldn't be travelling with a scoundrel like Juan the Giant," returned Poke.

On the following day, to Dan's gratification, he was placed on guard at the hospital. This brought him in contact with Lieutenant Ford, and he was more than pleased to learn that the officer was doing better than the surgeon had anticipated. The lieutenant was now in his right mind, and spoke freely of what he and Poke had overheard.

"I can testify that Dwight Pellingham and Jack Bracer are the guilty parties," he said. "And I know the general will take my word."

This being so, steps were taken to place the two evil-doers under arrest. Bracer was already out of the hospital, the surgeons being satisfied that his sickness had been of small consequence, if, indeed, he had not been shamming totally.

In some way word got to both Pellingham and Bracer that they were wanted at headquarters, and that Lieutenant Ford had spoken against them.

"The jig is up!" cried Bracer. "I'm going to quit."

"Quit?" faltered Pellingham, turning pale. "Are you — you going to give yourself up?"

"Not much! I'm going to light out. If you want to go along, say so."

"But — but where will you go to?"

"I'm going to join the Mexican army. They have a few companies of Americans — good fellows, too, so I've heard. I'm going to train with them after this."

What Jack Bracer said was true. In the Mexican army were, indeed, several hundred men from the United States who had thrown in their fortunes with Santa Anna, being assured of a big reward should Mexico win in the war. How these traitors fared will be learned later.

"I — I don't want to go in with the nasty

greasers," replied the dandy soldier. "They make me sick."

"All right, then — stay here and be shot," returned Bracer, briefly. And he at once began preparations to depart.

But the thought of being shot was terrifying to Pellingham, and when Bracer left the camp of the command, Pellingham was with him.

The two had determined to leave Vera Cruz under cover of darkness, and they remained in an out-of-the-way building until almost eleven o'clock. Then Bracer led the advance to the city wall, and ran for it, taking the chance of being shot by a guard.

Bracer was well in advance when a shout arose, and soon a rifle spoke up, and a bullet scraped Pellingham in the side. At once the foppish soldier fell on his knees, screaming.

"Don't shoot me!" he yelled. "I surrender! Don't shoot!" And he continued to yell until taken in charge by the guard. In the meantime Jack Bracer made good his escape.

When brought up for a hearing, Pellingham was the picture of despair. Having been made to listen to Lieutenant Ford's testimony, he broke down utterly, and told all.

"But I didn't mean any harm," he whined. "I

only wanted to play a joke on Radbury. I had no idea it would turn out so seriously."

"But why didn't you confess before?" he was asked.

"I was afraid of Bracer. He threatened to kill me if I said one word that would get him into trouble."

Of course the hearing left Dan free of all blame, and he was told that the charge against him was removed. Dwight Pellingham was placed under arrest, and later on he was sentenced to a year in prison, which carried with it a dishonorable discharge from the army. It may be added here that he served time in prison without complaint, and, at the end, started in to work, with all his dandy and foppish manners completely crushed. In time he made quite a man of himself, so that, after all, his army experiences counted for a good deal.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE HUMAN MELONS

"WELL, if I'm not tired and sick of this, then I don't know what being tired and sick means."

It was Ralph who uttered the words. He sat on a stone bench in a gloomy, cave-like opening high among the mountains, in the vicinity of Cerro Gordo pass. To one side was a still higher mountain, to the other an abyss many hundreds of feet deep.

Ralph had been there many days, and from a great distance had heard some firing of cannon, although what it meant he could not tell. But one day he heard, through a guard who could speak a little English, that General Scott had landed near Vera Cruz, and was bombarding the city.

"I hope he not only wins, but that he comes here," thought the young prisoner of war. "I want to be rescued soon."

Ralph was not alone. Six other prisoners were

present, and now the guards kept coming in daily with more. The accommodations were limited, and with the increase of prisoners, food became scanty, and the young soldier hardly got sufficient to keep him from starving.

"This is awful," he said to a sharpshooter named Jack Howell. "I wish we could get away."

"You don't wish it any more than I do, Ralph," answered Howell, who had taken a fancy to the lad. "Perhaps we'll get the chance to take French leave if we watch the guards closely."

The next day came a break in the monotony. Ralph was dozing in a corner of the prison when the guards brought in an Irishman, who was complaining most lustily over the treatment received.

"Sure an' you are no gintlemen!" came from the newly-made prisoner. "Let go av me arrum, do yez hear? How can I be afther runnin' away wid half a hundred about me an' no gun either, bedad!"

"Corporal Tim McManus!" ejaculated Ralph, leaping up and running forward.

"Be the saints! Ralph Radbury!" came from Corporal Tim, and he stared in amazement. "Sure an' I was afther thinkin' ye was dead long since."

"No, I'm well enough, corporal. But I'm a prisoner."

"Sure an' it's that selfsame fate has overtaken yours truly."

"Where did you come from?"

"From the walls av Vera Cruz. I wint out to look for a cartridge-box I was afther losing, an' the greasers surprised me in the dark an' carried me off. How long have ye been here, lad?"

"About a couple of weeks, I think. I've lost track of time — one day is so much like another. Howell, this is Corporal Tim McManus of our company. Tim, this is Jack Howell, of the sharpshooters."

"Yis, I know av him," said McManus, shaking hands. "Well, if I'm a prisoner, I'm in good company." And he grinned.

McManus had much to tell of the capture of the city, and of what had befallen Dan, and Ralph listened eagerly to all that was told. The younger Radbury was astonished to think Pellingham and Bracer could be so bad.

"And what became of Bracer?" he asked.

"Sure an' he must be with the greasers," said Corporal Tim.

The night which followed was not a lonely one for Ralph, for he and McManus talked until after

twelve o'clock, when the guard came in and commanded them to be silent.

Early in the morning a fresh batch of prisoners were brought in, making the total number present over a hundred. Then half of the number were told to march out, this party including our friends.

"I guess they are going to take us still higher up into the mountains," was Ralph's comment.

Presently a number of carts came along, carrying melons and other fruits, some loosely and some in bags. The sight of the bags gave Howell, the sharpshooter, an idea.

"Perhaps we can get into some of those bags," he whispered.

A large cart was left standing close by, while the driver and the guards went off to attend to some business. In a twinkle Howell leaped toward the turnout, mounted it, and seized an empty bag.

"Here goes for luck!" he cried, in a low voice, and slipped the bag over his body. Then he crouched down, working a few loose melons over him.

"Bedad! I can do that same," muttered Tim McManus, and also seized a bag. Ralph did likewise, and presently the trio were secreted in the cart. More wanted to follow, but just then the

driver came back, and the other prisoners walked away, after begging a melon, the driver giving them one which was partly decayed.

Soon the cart was bumping over the rough road. Those in the bags expected each instant to be called back by a guard, but nobody stopped the cart, and inside of half an hour the turnout was well on its way down the mountainside.

It was extremely warm in the bag, and Ralph could scarcely get his breath. On they bumped, from one stone to another, shaking them up fully as much as the melons. The driver smoked philosophically and never once looked behind to learn how his load was faring, and unsuspicious of the human freight he was carrying.

But the end of the game was close at hand. All of the bags were dusty, and soon the dust got into McManus's nose and he had to sneeze in spite of all he could do to stop himself.

"Ker-chew! Ker-chew! Ker-chew!" he went, in rapid succession. "Oh, bedad, but I can't sthand this dirt at all at all! Ker-chew! Ker-chew!" And out of the bag popped his head.

Hearing the sounds, Ralph and Howell quickly uncovered, and before the driver could offer any resistance the sharpshooter had him by the throat.

"*Silencio!*" he cried. "*Silencio!*"

It was but a single word, but it was enough; and the driver remained mute, at the same time with terror in his eyes.

"What shall we do next?" asked Ralph, anxiously.

"See if the road is clear," replied Howell. "And be quick about it."

Kicking themselves clear of the bags, Ralph and McManus leaped to the ground and ran ahead. Not a soul was in sight for the distance of half a mile.

Coming back they reported this to the sharpshooter. At once Howell ordered the Mexican cart-driver to the ground.

"Follow me with that rope," he said to Ralph. "McManus, take care of the cart for a few minutes."

"Sure, an' what's the game now?" demanded Corporal Tim.

"I'm going to tie this fellow up in the woods."

"But you won't leave him to starve, will you?" asked Ralph, quickly.

"No, I'll fix it so he can get free in an hour or two," answered Howell.

He made the prisoner move away from the road a distance of fifty yards.

Here stood a stout tropical tree, and to this the cart-driver was bound.

The fellow tried to protest, but it was of no avail.

From one of his pockets a pistol was taken, and this the sharpshooter handled with much satisfaction.

"Ain't the best kind of a shooting-iron," was his comment, "but it beats nothing all holler;" and Ralph agreed with him.

At the cart they found Corporal Tim anxiously awaiting their return.

"It is no time we must be afther losin'," said the Irish soldier. "Come awn!"

In a moment more they were on the way. Howell had brought along the Mexican's hat and blouse. These he now donned, and rubbed his face with a little of the yellow dust of the road.

"Señor," he said, in fair Spanish, "will I pass for a Mexican?"

"I think you will," answered Ralph with a smile; "only I think the Spanish is a little shaky."

"You're all right," put in McManus. "But phat about Ralph an' me, tell me that now? We can't pass fer greasers."

"You shall pass for melons," answered Howell.

The adventure put them all in good humor, and as they drove on they devoured all of the melons they cared to eat.

It was not until half an hour later that several carts hove in sight coming toward them from a side road.

"Now you can get back into the bags," said Howell, hurriedly, "and mind you, not a move, or the jig will be up."

"We'll be as quiet as mice in a grain-house," replied Ralph, and got into a bag without delay. McManus did the same, and Howell almost covered them with loose melons.

Slowly the other carts came closer. Howell drove along as unconcernedly as possible, but his eyes were on the alert, and he kept the pistol where he could reach it instantly, should it be required.

Presently a driver on one of the other carts called a halt, and the sharpshooter was compelled to pull up.

"What do you want?" he demanded, in his best Spanish.

"Where is Coroval?" was the question put in return.

"I do not know."

"Didn't you leave him at San Benota?"

"I think he was there," said Howell, cautiously. He knew not what to say.

"Are those Señor Ramon's melons — the ones from his old storehouse?"

"I think they are."

"All right, then," was the ready answer. "I have orders to take them on this cart, and you are to go back for some hay."

CHAPTER XXV.

BACK TO THE RANKS

As soon as the Mexican in the leading cart began to question him, Howell realized that he had made one grave mistake.

That was, that he had not questioned the Mexican who had been made a prisoner, and learned his name and the full particulars of his business on the road.

But in his haste to get closer to Vera Cruz the sharpshooter had not taken time for this, and now his ignorance was likely to cost him dear.

"You say I am to go back for some hay?" repeated Howell, slowly, in an endeavor to get his wits together.

"Yes. And, by the way, who are you?" questioned the Mexican, and now three other cart-drivers drew closer and came to a halt to listen to the talk.

"I am Señor Ramon's new man," answered Howell, smoothly.

"Ah! I remember he said he was going to get some new hands," replied the Mexican, with increased interest. "You are from Vera Cruz, then?"

"Yes."

"The Yankees have captured that city."

"So I heard."

"Señor Ramon had no right to take on new men from there," put in another cart-driver. "The old men were good enough. It is taking the bread out of our mouths."

"The work belongs to us," put in a third, with a scowl. "It has been ours for years."

"I know nothing about that," said Howell. "I was ordered to take the melons to a place just outside of Vera Cruz."

"And not here — to us?" came from the leading cart-driver quickly.

"No."

At once there was a murmur, and it was plain to see the cart-drivers were angered over something. As a matter of fact, there had been numerous quarrels between old cart-drivers and new ones, and the rivalry was very bitter.

"You are a wretch to try to take this work from us!" cried one cart-driver, a moment later.

"For but little I would thrash you soundly," and he began to swear roundly.

Suddenly two others leaped forward and tried to pull Howell from the seat of the cart.

But like a flash out came the sharpshooter's pistol and they fell back in dismay.

"Dare to follow me and I will shoot," he said, still in Spanish. "The work is mine and I intend to keep it. I shall report this to Señor Ramon as soon as I get back."

Then he drove on, leaving the cart-drivers staring after him in utter dismay.

He lost no time in getting away, and soon the cart had passed out of sight of those left behind. Then the sharpshooter burst into a laugh of relief.

"Fooled 'em nicely that trip," he cried. "But it was a close shave."

"Sure, an' phat was it all about?" questioned McManus, as he stripped off the bag.

The sharpshooter told both of his companions and they laughed. But Ralph shook his head directly afterward.

"We don't want another encounter like that," he said. "As it is, they will be after us in a few hours, mark my words."

The distance from Cerro Gordo to Vera Cruz is

about sixty miles, and the party calculated that they were still forty-five or fifty miles from the seacoast. They travelled on as fast as the animals drawing the cart could go, and inside of an hour reached a spot where the trail ran downward. Here was a sheltered nook, and they stopped to rest.

They had scarcely dismounted when they heard a clatter of hoofs behind them.

"To cover!" shouted Howell. "That's Mexican cavalry, or I miss my guess!"

They lost no time in diving into the brushwood lining the road, and none too soon, for less than half a minute later the cavalry, several hundred strong, swept into view.

They were a fine looking body, commanded by a stout-built Mexican, wearing on his breast half a dozen medals. As soon as the abandoned cart was discovered, the cavalry came to a halt.

"They are after us, sure enough," muttered Ralph. "But why so many?"

"Reckon they were coming this way anyhow," whispered Howell. "But be that as it may, we had better make tracks, unless we want to go back to our prison."

He led the way deeper into the brushwood and the others came close on his heels. Soon they entered something of a hollow, where it was dark.

Still Howell kept on, nor did he stop until fully a mile was covered.

"They will spread out and search for us, you can be sure of that," he remarked. "They hate like poison to have a prisoner get away from them."

Once during the next hour an alarm came, for as they crossed a side trail six cavalrymen showed themselves less than two hundred yards away. Again they lost no time in speeding forward, and when darkness came they calculated that they had put another ten miles behind them.

But the next day they had to rest, for McManus had hurt his foot on a sharp rock and could not walk. Howell went out and brought in enough food for a scanty meal, while Ralph remained on guard.

It was noon of the day following when they started forward once more. McManus was still lame, and they had to help him over many a hard place. But even with this they made fairly good progress.

They passed several towns and villages, but always at a distance, taking care that nobody should see them. It was hot and dry now, and more than once they suffered for a drink of good water. But nobody complained.

"Sure an' it's the forchunes av war," said Corporal Tim. "'Tis no child's play."

At last they thought they must be close to their journey's end. The mountains had been left behind and they had come out on the low-lying sand-hills running down to the gulf. But whether they were north or south of Vera Cruz they could not tell.

Presently they heard cannon-fire to the north of their position. At first the shots were scattering but then came a steady booming, followed by the rattle of musketry, and a cloud of smoke arose over a hill in that direction.

"It is a battle!" cried Ralph, excitedly. "Come on!" And he ran in that direction, with the others close on his heels.

Reaching the top of the hill, they saw that a lively skirmish was in progress close by, between some United States and some Mexican cavalry. The cannonading came from still farther off.

The Mexican cavalry were retreating, and in a minute more over a hundred excited horsemen came bearing straight for our friends. The Americans were shooting after the retreating enemy, and bullets whistled in every direction.

"Lay low!" sang out Howell, and they lost no time in creeping into a gully which cut the hill into two parts.

On and on swept the Mexicans, with the United States cavalry close at their heels, and in a few minutes more our friends found themselves among troops that they knew well. They gave a cheer, at which some of the cavalry stopped, to stare in amazement.

"Where did you spring from?" demanded one of the officers.

"We have been prisoners of the Mexicans, and we escaped several days ago," answered Ralph. "We are trying to find our way to Vera Cruz."

"Prisoners, eh? All right, go back and wait until we return. We want to give those greasers a bit of a chase."

Our friends waited, and in half an hour the cavalry came back, having driven the enemy into the thickets of the mountainside. Then it was learned that the United States cavalry was an advance-guard sent out to clear the way for General Scott's army, now on the move toward the City of Mexico.

"Hurrah! we're safe!" cried McManus.

"Let us get back to our commands as soon as we can," said Ralph, and having received directions, they set off, and soon reached the main body of soldiers, who were getting ready to go into camp for the night. Here Howell left the others.

"Ralph!" yelled Dan, when he saw his brother stalking toward him. And he leaped forward and caught the lad in his arms. Then others came up, and not only Ralph but also Corporal Tim received a warm welcome.

It was a great evening around the camp-fire, with everybody telling his story or listening to what others had to say. Dan could scarcely believe that Ralph had gone through so much, and on his part Ralph was amazed at the news concerning Dwight Pellingham and Jack Bracer.

"Jack Bracer will never forgive you, Dan," he said. "You will have to watch him closely, if you ever meet him again."

The following morning Ralph, Corporal Tim, and Howell were ordered to headquarters, and there they told their story once more. They had much information of value to give, and this was received with great satisfaction. Then they were ordered back to the ranks; and half an hour later were on the march.

"And now to meet the Mexicans and whip them," said Ralph. "It will give me great pleasure to defeat those who made me a prisoner."

"And it will give me great pleasure to meet Jose Toletto and Juan the Giant and bring them to justice," came from Dan.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BATTLE OF CERRO GORDO

As told before, Cerro Gordo lay high up among the mountains, with rocky elevations on one side and a deep ravine on the other. The road to it ran over the sandy hills and was in plain view of the mountain top.

Since the fall of Vera Cruz, Santa Anna and his generals had not been idle, and hard work had been done to fortify Cerro Gordo and the vicinity, with cannon and in other ways. Guns were planted in such a manner that they could sweep the approaches to the mountain pass for a mile or more, and numerous small bridges were either cut away or blown up. In some places natural pitfalls were made ten times worse; all in the vain hope that the advance of the United States army might be checked.

But such an old and able commander as General Scott was not to be caught napping. From numerous spies he learned all that the Mexicans were

doing, and understood only too well that to advance upon the mountain pass by the regular road would be foolhardy — unless, of course, it might be possible to distract the Mexicans' attention in another direction.

"We will flank their battery," said the able general, and preparations were at once made to carry this plan into effect. A demonstration was made in front and then on either side, and soon our troops had the Mexicans completely bewildered.

The march up into the mountains proved a trying one, but neither Dan nor Ralph minded it, so glad were they to be together again and to know that each brother was safe and sound. Dan had gotten a letter from home the night before, and as all was going on well at the ranch this helped to complete their contentment.

"We are going to push the Mexicans hard this trip," said Dan. "I don't believe General Scott will let up an inch, now he has started."

"It's the only way to do," answered Ralph. "When you once get a man on the run, keep him at it until he drops. That's what Poke told me once, and it's good advice. By the way, where is Poke?"

"Looking after some wagons as usual. He's

the handiest man they have for that sort of thing. Yet he doesn't want to go in the regular train."

As they marched along they passed several spots familiar to Ralph, and he pointed out where they had met the Mexicans with their carts, and where they had secured the cart in which they were hiding.

"You were mighty lucky to get away," said the older brother. "Nine prisoners out of ten would have been shot down in short order."

It was late on the second day after this conversation that the advance-guard came in with news that some Mexican troops were not far ahead, on a road to the left. Several regiments were at once despatched to that vicinity, including the command to which Ralph belonged. Later on the troops to which Dan and Poke belonged also came up.

Inside of half an hour the Mexican sharpshooters began firing on our advance-guard, and soon came a steady crack-cracking of guns, followed presently by the roar of cannon and the shrieking of shells.

"We are in for the real thing now!" cried Ralph, who thus far had not been in a battle since leaving General Taylor's army.

And it was "the real thing," more fierce than many a soldier on either side had expected. At

first the Mexicans had the best of it, shooting from behind rocks and mountain brushwood, but our boys came on with a gallant rush and the enemy were quickly dislodged, and then one side had as much protection as the other.

"Down with the greasers!" came the cry. "Forward, every man! Hurrah for Uncle Sam!" And forward they went, until Ralph's company was in the very midst of a hot fire, with bullets whistling in every direction. One bullet passed through his soldier jacket and another clipped his shoulder, and he saw a man directly in front of him throw up his arms and fall dead. He had to leap over the body to keep from falling himself.

The onward rush lasted the best part of half an hour. The firing came by fits and starts. Once a Mexican soldier aimed at a lieutenant moving close to Ralph. The young soldier let drive with a bullet and the Mexican went down, seriously if not mortally wounded.

"I'll remember that, Radbury," cried the lieutenant, grimly. "Well done!" And he rushed on, and immediately the tide of battle carried the two apart.

The advance was now up the side of a rocky point, and here the command to which Dan belonged joined the others. General Scott had

begun to flank the batteries on the heights of Cerro Gordo, and the Mexicans were turning first in one direction and then another. Some of our soldiers were engaged in cutting a path through the thick chaparral.

The fighting came to an end with Ralph and the others about half-way up the mountainside. A demonstration to the front of Cerro Gordo, under Colonel Harney, had completely deceived the enemy, and at an early hour on the following morning the attack was renewed, with Pillow's brigade assaulting the right, Twigg's brigade attacking the fortification in the centre, and Riley's brigade driving the bewildered Mexicans from one post of defence to another. While this was going on the soldiers under General Shields captured a battery in the rear of the enemy's left, which had its full share in bringing on utter defeat for the Mexicans.

In the general assault Dan found himself in more than one hot situation. He was climbing around a bit of rough rocks when the company found itself suddenly confronted by half a regiment of Mexican veterans. A wild yell went up, and almost immediately a savage hand-to-hand struggle ensued, — such as is in modern wars of rare occurrence. The rocky point was hemmed in on

three sides by deep ravines, and the Mexicans did their best to make the United States soldiers retreat, knowing that they would thus be forced into one or another of the perilous openings.

"Stand your ground!" came the cry. "Don't give in a foot!" And then the roar of musketry, coupled with the roar of a battery belching forth from a point still farther up the mountain, drowned out every other sound. The smoke was so thick that but little could be seen.

"To the left — double-quick!" Dan heard a little later, and saw some of the command shifting in the direction mentioned. He tried to go with the rest, but stumbled over several wounded men and went down. As he attempted to rise, a savage looking Mexican caught him by the foot.

The Mexican was suffering from a broken leg, but there was still a good deal of fight left in him, and as he held Dan with one hand he raised a long horse-pistol with the other and pointed the weapon at the young soldier's heart.

"I'll bring one more dog of a Yankee down!" he cried, in Spanish, and pulled the trigger.

Although horrified, Dan was not so alarmed but what he kept his wits about him, and as the Mexican pulled the trigger, he let out with one foot and gave the fellow a kick in the wrist. The

pistol dropped as it was about to go off and the bullet lodged in the ground. Then Dan gave the Mexican another kick, this time in the face, and ran on.

The tide of battle was now sweeping toward a watercourse which found its way through the mountains at this point, and a little later Ralph and Dan met close beside the wreck of a bridge which had been blown up by the Mexicans several days before.

"There is blood on your hand, Ralph!" cried the elder Radbury.

"It's only a scratch," was the answer. "How are you faring?"

"Pretty well, although the Mexicans have tried their best to kill me."

"I am dying for a drink."

"So am I."

So were a great number of others, and from an officer the men obtained permission to go down a steep bit of ground to where the water could be reached.

Ralph and Dan slid down side by side, holding on to rocks and brushwood for support. The river below flowed swiftly and neither felt like wanting a ducking, although they would not have minded a good swim, had there not been a battle on.

"It ought to be cold, coming right from the mountains," said Ralph, as he got down to within two yards of where the stream rushed onward.

"We want to be careful," cautioned his brother, after a glance back. "If I'm not mistaken, the battery on yonder hill can cover this spot nicely."

"Well, I hope they don't try to cover us, Dan. Hold on now. Give me your hand. There! now we can reach it. I'm going to drink all I can and then fill the canteen."

Some other soldiers were already drinking, and soon Ralph and Dan were "filling up," as they expressed it. The water was both pure and cold and came like nectar to their parched throats.

Having drunk all they wished, they started to fill not only their own canteens, but also several others given to them by their friends who could not leave the firing line.

"Look out, boys!" came a sudden yell.

The cry was followed by the roar of a cannon from a height above them. Then came another roar, and a shell came rolling down toward the river.

"It's coming this way!" cried Dan. "Jump, Ralph, jump for your life!"

And then, as the shell rolled closer, Dan caught his brother by the hand and both leaped into the rushing stream below them. A dozen other soldiers followed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MARCHING THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS

For the moment Ralph knew nothing more than that the waters of the stream closed over his head and that he and Dan were caught in a confused mass of soldiers, all struggling to save their lives.

Then came a deafening report, as the shell exploded, and a huge mass of rocks and brushwood was hurled into the air, the greater part to fall into the river, much of it on the soldiers' heads. In this downfall one soldier received a large stone on his neck and was instantly killed thereby.

It was a thick mass of brushwood which came down directly over both Ralph and Dan, forcing them far below the surface of the stream. They clutched each other and did their best to throw the brushwood off.

On and on swept the brushwood down the river, carrying the unfortunates with it. Dan, being the stronger, at last forced his head above water. Getting a hold on a large part of the

brushwood, he managed to drag Ralph up after him.

"Ralph! are you all right?" he asked, as soon as he could speak.

"I — I suppose so," gasped the younger Radbury. "But — but where are we?"

"In the midst of a pile of brushwood that came down after the shell exploded."

They were indeed in the midst of the brushwood, which set over their heads like an immense hood, shutting out the sight on every side. Soon Dan felt a movement behind him, and another soldier came up, gasping for his very life.

For fully a minute not one of the three under the brushwood could do more than cling fast and try to regain his breath. The strange soldier could scarcely hold fast, and Ralph helped to support him.

"We're in for it," said Dan, presently.

"This is a case of another drift on a river," replied Ralph, grimly. "But we haven't got Miss Morales with us this time."

"We must be drifting right into the heart of the enemy's country, Ralph."

"I believe you."

"Say, how are we to get ashore?" came from the strange soldier.

"That's a question," answered Dan. "First we've got to clear ourselves of this brush."

"Don't do it. If we expose ourselves we may get shot."

This seemed good advice, yet nobody wished to stay under the brushwood any longer than was necessary.

But presently the mass of drifting stuff struck the shore of the river and came to a stop.

"Landed," said the strange soldier, laconically. "And I can touch bottom," he added, after a pause.

With caution they raised one end of the heap of brushwood and peered forth. Then they let it drop again in a hurry.

And not without reason, for directly in front of them was a Mexican camp containing at least two companies of soldiers. The soldiers were guarding a stock of ammunition which had just been brought up on two carts.

"What shall we do next?" whispered Ralph.

"Nothing just now," answered Dan. "Perhaps they'll move off soon."

A yell was now heard, and some of the soldiers came rushing to the bank of the river. They had discovered two Yankees struggling in midstream for their lives. The two soldiers were promptly shot amid a wild cheering.

"Reckon that's the way they'd serve us if they got the chance," said the stranger, to Ralph and Dan. He gritted his teeth. "Are you good on fighting?"

"We'll fight — if it comes to it," responded Dan. "But I think it will pay us better to lay low."

"Correct, partner."

Ten minutes passed. From a distance came a constant firing. The Mexicans beside the ammunition seemed very anxious.

A horseman came clattering up, yelling directions in Spanish. At once the ammunition was deserted, and the Mexicans moved off on the double-quick.

"They are retreating!" cried Dan, joyfully. "Our boys must be coming this way!"

He was right, and soon a regiment of United States regulars came pouring over a near-by hill-top. They were after the Mexicans in hot haste, and as they swept on paid no attention to the Radburys and their companion.

It was no easy matter to find their way back to their commands, but at last Ralph found his company, and Dan's company was not far off. They were hailed as from the dead.

"Thought every one who went into the river was killed," said an under officer, to Ralph.

"Sure an' ye can't kill the Radburys," put in McManus, who stood near. "They are afther havin' the loives av noine cats, bedad!"

The fight was still on, but now the Mexicans were fleeing in confusion, and already a large number of prisoners had been taken. In the round-up which followed Poke Stover played a conspicuous part, and he came in at the head of sixteen prisoners.

When the battle was over it was found that our troops had sustained a loss of sixty-four killed and three hundred and fifty wounded. The loss to the Mexicans was fully as great, and in addition three thousand of the enemy were made prisoners, including five generals and scores of minor officers. Four thousand six hundred firearms were also captured, along with forty-three pieces of artillery. It was only by a close shave that Santa Anna himself escaped, and he was in such a hurry to get away that he left his wooden leg behind him!

The victory had been a grand one, and that night, as tired as the soldiers were, they lit huge camp-fires in its honor. Everybody had his story to tell. And there was likewise plenty to do, for the sick, wounded, and dying had to be cared for, the dead buried, and the prisoners watched.

After this battle Santa Anna and the remnant of his army retired to Jalapa and Perote. The Mexicans were in a demoralized condition, and for a time it looked as if the defeated general would be driven out by the revolutionists.

Knowing the condition of affairs, General Scott did not delay any more than absolutely necessary. As soon as the prisoners and others needing attention were cared for, he pushed forward through the mountain passes.

Once more our young soldiers found themselves on the road. It was now the middle of April, and the weather was unusually hot, so that everybody was glad to reach a high point where there might be something of a cooling breeze.

From Cerro Gordo the army moved straight upon Jalapa and Perote. At first the Mexicans thought to make a stand at these two towns, but before the United States troops could get at close range, the Mexicans fled.

On the 22d of April our army marched into Perote and took possession there of a large amount of army stores. The Mexicans in the town appeared friendly, but a strict guard was maintained, for General Scott was in dread of treachery. He was now many miles from his base of supplies, and if Santa Anna should succeed in cutting him

off, our army would certainly fare badly, if not suffer complete annihilation.

"What a sleepy-looking town," remarked Dan, as he and Poke marched into the place side by side. "I don't believe these greasers know how to do a real hard day's work."

"The heat is against them," answered the old frontiersman. "But jest you wait. Some day there'll be a railroad out here, an' then ye'll see things boom." What Poke said has come true in part. There is a railroad there. Yet the boom in the main is still lacking, although business is fairly good, and people from the States are gradually drifting in.

The command to which Dan and Poke belonged was set to watching a big storehouse full of goods. On the second evening on guard Dan was standing on a corner when he saw a man skulking along close by.

"Halt!" he called to the individual, but the fellow paid no attention.

"Halt, or I'll fire!" cried the young soldier, louder than ever. He had his gun up, but before he could get an aim the man disappeared behind an angle of the wall.

With all speed Dan rushed in that direction, to discover that the fellow had entered a storeroom

with open windows. It was somewhat dark inside, and the young soldier came to a halt, not knowing exactly what to do next.

Then of a sudden the man came out again and rushed across the street. As he did so Dan got a good look at him and opened his eyes in amazement.

"Juan the Giant!" he gasped.

It was indeed Badillo, and at the cry the giant turned and shook his fist at Dan. Then he continued to run down a side street.

By this time the corporal of the guard was running up.

"What's the row?" he demanded.

"A man was here. He ran down that way. It was that Juan Badillo I once told you about."

"Did he steal anything?"

"I don't know. Can I go after him?"

"Yes, but don't go alone."

"Will you send Poke Stover after me? If I wait to get him, the man will slip me."

"All right, I'll send Stover."

Waiting to say no more, Dan began the chase after Juan the Giant, running as fast as his legs would carry him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN WHICH A DESERTER FALLS

DAN had been thoroughly astonished at catching sight of Juan Badillo, for he had imagined that the giant had gone directly from Vera Cruz to the City of Mexico.

But his astonishment speedily gave way to a determination to catch the rascal if the deed could be accomplished, and the way he sprinted along after the tall fellow was truly astonishing.

He could see Badillo plainly, but soon the giant turned into a side street lined with private houses, all of the regulation Mexican pattern.

"I'll have to go slow here," said the young soldier to himself. "He will play me foul if he gets half the chance."

With gun ready for use, he turned into the side street. Badillo was still on the run, but not going as fast as formerly.

Presently the man ahead passed under a small bridge connecting a house on one side of the

roadway with a house on the other side. Here it was dark, and, in the deep shadows, Dan lost track of Juan the Giant.

Coming to the side of the bridge, the young soldier paused again. He could hear rapid footsteps behind, and wondered if Poke Stover was coming up.

Suddenly something caused Dan to glance up. He was just in time to behold Badillo on the bridge. The giant had a large brick in his hand, and was in the act of throwing it at the young soldier's head.

Dan tried to dodge, but his movement was not quick enough, and the brick came down with crushing force, and the young soldier dropped like a log where he stood.

"Ha! a good shot!" muttered the giant, to himself, in Spanish. "He will not follow me again in a hurry!"

He was about to move on, when, with set teeth, he paused, and drew a knife from beneath his coat.

"Now I have him in my power, it would be well to finish him," he muttered. "And he may have something of value in his clothing."

He started down toward Dan, when the approaching footsteps caught his ear.

"Ha! somebody comes! Who can it be?"

"Dan! Dan Radbury!" came the cry. "Where are you, Dan?"

"Some friend of the fellow!" growled Juan Badillo, and, on the instant, he drew back and continued his flight, and, in a few seconds, the darkness swallowed him completely.

Dan lay like one dead where he had fallen, and it was a good five minutes before Poke stumbled upon him by accident.

"Great Jerusha!" ejaculated the old frontiersman, as he bent over the motionless form. "Knocked out fer fair! Dan, are ye alive?"

The only answer was a groan, and, more alarmed than ever, Poke caught up the body in his arms, and carried it to where there was more light. The blood was trickling down Dan's face, and a lump was rising where the brick had struck.

It was too far to carry Dan back to the place from which he had started, and Poke did the next best thing — took him to where water could be obtained. Here the scalp wound was washed and plastered up.

By this time Dan was recovering, but he remained partly dazed for some time.

"Oh, what a crack!" he gasped.

"Did thet Badillo hit ye?" questioned Poke, sympathetically.

"He did, Poke. But — but — where am I?"

"Here, by a town well. I found ye, and carried ye here. You were a-layin' under a bridge —"

"Yes — I remember now. He was on the bridge, and flung a brick down on my head. I've got quite a lump, haven't I?"

"It's lucky he didn't crack your skull for ye, lad. Tell ye wot, he's a rascal from top to bottom, no two ways on't."

"Did you see where he went to?"

"No, I didn't see him at all."

"Then I guess there is no use to hunt for him now."

"No; he will keep mighty shady while we stay in the town, you can be sure o' thet," responded the old frontiersman.

When Dan walked back to his command, he felt terribly dizzy, and his head ached as if it would split open. He reported for duty, and was then told to go to the surgeon for repairs, and did so. Although the lump remained for some time, he felt quite like himself by the evening of the day following.

"All this goes to prove what a really dangerous character Juan the Giant is," said Ralph, when he heard of what had occurred. "The only way to treat that fellow is to do as they do among the

men of the bad lands, shoot first and talk afterward."

A portion of the army remained at Perote some time, but the division under General Worth soon after took up the march against the Mexican capital, and attacked the city of Puebla, a prosperous community containing many thousands of inhabitants. It was at first thought that a big battle would take place at Puebla, but, at the last moment, Santa Anna found himself unable to get his forces together, and the Mexican army fled toward the capital, leaving the United States troops masters of the situation.

"We are getting a walkover," said Ralph, when the troops marched into Puebla. "If we take the City of Mexico as easily as we took this town, there will be next to nothing for us to do."

"Don't fool yourself about the City of Mexico," said a soldier standing near. "That is well fortified, and, to get inside, we will have to do the tallest kind of fighting," and his words proved true, as we shall soon see.

The capture of Puebla took place on the 22d of May, and, as soon as this occurred, General Scott moved his army hither, and made the town his headquarters.

There now occurred a long period of rest to the

soldiers, lasting from the capture of Puebla to the 7th of August. During this time the army was recruited and many sick and disabled were sent home, and negotiations were also opened with Mexican authorities looking toward a speedy peace. But the Mexicans could not agree among themselves as to what should be done; and so the war went on.

The march was now directly into the mountains and amid a wilderness that was almost bewildering. The army consisted of less than eleven thousand men, and the daring of this forward movement can scarcely be estimated. Even in times of peace the Mexican roads were never free from brigands and cutthroats, who found the mountains excellent hiding-places. Our soldiers had to be constantly on the alert for fear of an ambuscade or that the enemy would run them into some *cul-de-sac*, or "pocket," and slaughter them.

"This is a wilderness if ever there was one," said Ralph, as they trudged along through a pass with tall mountains frowning down on both sides of them. "Wonder if the Mexicans will have nerve enough to hem us in?"

"More than likely they are strengthening their capital," answered Dan. "That is where they will make their grand stand."

One route having been found impassable, another was selected, and by the eighteenth of the month the army reached San Augustin, on the Acapulco road. Here came another brief rest, welcome to our young soldiers.

"How far still to the City of Mexico?" asked Ralph one morning.

"Only about eight or nine miles," answered Dan, who had received the news from one of the civil engineers.

"Then we haven't much more travelling to do."

"No, after this it will be nothing but fighting," and Dan smiled.

"Do you really think we'll get much of it?"

"To be sure. Why, to the Mexicans their capital is the dearest spot on earth. They will fight like tigers to hold it."

"Have you heard when we are to attack?"

"No. But you can trust General Scott to lay his plans with skill. He hasn't made a mistake so far. The whole campaign has been a victory from start to finish."

The forward movement was not long delayed, and again they found themselves on the march, this time climbing hills steeper than any yet travelled. It was hard work, and more than one soldier gave out and had to drop to the rear.

The soldiers were now marching over a lava field called by the Mexicans the Pedregal. This they did to avoid the Mexican fortifications at other points. They were on the road to Contreras, and here an engagement took place between a United States brigade under General Smith and a Mexican force under General Valencia. Contrary to General Santa Anna's orders, Valencia had shifted his position, and now exposed himself to bitter defeat at our hands. The Mexicans lost over fifteen hundred killed and captured, and Valencia himself fled to the hills. When the report of this disaster reached Santa Anna, he was furious, and ordered Valencia shot on sight.

The cry was now "On to Churubusco!" and uniting his forces once more, General Scott swept down upon that doomed fortification. Here was an old convent which had been turned into a fort, beside heavy earthen works, all bristling with cannon.

"I understand Churubusco is the holding-out place for those deserters from our side," said Dan, on the march forward. "Have you heard anything of that, Poke?"

"I have. They call themselves the St. Patrick Guard, or somethin' like that. They ought ter be hung fer going back on Uncle Sam."

"Some of them will surely be shot, — if we get a chance to do it," returned Dan.

Half an hour later the first assault on the fortifications took place. There was a constant roar of cannon, the shrieking of shells, and the rattle of small arms, and this was kept up for three hours. Time and again the Americans were driven back, but they rallied again and again, and at last took the outworks by a fierce hand-to-hand struggle which brought many a gallant soldier low. It was in this onslaught that brave Corporal Tim McManus received a bullet in the knee which was the means of depriving him of that limb and of compelling him to walk on a wooden leg for the balance of his life.

"But the foight was worth it," was what he said afterward, with his usual cheerfulness. "Sure an' we gave thim greasers such a lickin' as they niver got before in their loives. 'Twas six Donnybrook Fairs rolled into wan, an' nothin' less! Glory to the day I lost that leg fer Uncle Sam!"

Dan was in the midst of the fight, with Poke beside him, when he saw a dozen or more Americans run from one side of the Mexican fortification to another. He gave a cry.

"See, Poke, by all that is wonderful! There is Jack Bracer! And he is firing on our men!"

Dan was right; Bracer it was beyond question. The man was pale, and his face was full of bitter hatred.

"I'll fix him quick enough," came from the old frontiersman, and he raised his gun to fire.

But before he could pull the trigger Jack Bracer suddenly threw up his hands and pitched headlong in the tall grass. Some other soldier had saved Poke the trouble of shooting the deserter.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LAST BATTLES OF THE CAMPAIGN

It was not until half an hour after the fall of Jack Bracer that a white flag of truce appeared on the wall of the old convent and the Mexicans surrendered — that is, what was left of them at this point, for many had previously fled toward the City of Mexico. These fleeing ones were pursued by cavalry to the very walls of the city itself, and the cavalry might have even gained entrance into the capital, but they were recalled by General Scott, who did not wish to see a rash loss of life.

When an account was taken of the dead, wounded, and captured, it was found that Jack Bracer was still alive, although the surgeon who examined him said that he could not live more than twenty-four hours at the most.

Not wishing to worry a dying man, Dan did not attempt to speak to Bracer, but the latter asked for him, having seen the young soldier at a distance.

"They tell me I'm dying," said Bracer, with an effort.

"I am sorry to see you so bad," said Dan, soberly, and he spoke the truth. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Will you do it?" And Bracer looked at him suspiciously.

"Yes, Bracer, I'm willing to do all I can for a — a —"

"A what?"

"Never mind. What do you want done?"

"You were going to say a dying man, wasn't you?"

"Yes, if you must know."

The deserter heaved a heavy sigh. "Yes, I'm dying — the surgeon told me so. Well, if I didn't die they'd most likely shoot me anyway. But I didn't expect to come to this, Radbury."

"What can I do for you?"

"I — I've got a mother somewhere up in New Orleans. I treated her shamefully. Try to find her and tell her I was sorry I did it; and give her all that I've got and anything that is coming to me. Her name is Martha Bracer, widow of John Bracer. I was named after pop, but he was a far better man than I've been. I think I've got

money coming to me — from a man named Juan Badillo. Give that to her."

"Badillo!" cried Dan. "Then you know him?"

"So you know him, too?"

"Yes, he is a thief."

"I know it, but he's got a hundred dollars of my money that I came by honestly. He's somewhere in the City of Mexico, I think."

"Did he ever tell you where to find him there?" asked Dan, with increased interest.

"Yes. It's on a paper in my pocket. You can have it. Will you do what I wish?"

"If I possibly can, Bracer."

"Give me your hand on it."

Dan held out his hand, and Jack Bracer took it and slowly carried it to his lips and kissed it. When he started to talk again there was a lump in his throat, and Dan was similarly affected.

"I know you'll do what I wish — if you can. You're a good fellow, Radbury — a heap sight better'n me. Don't lay that trick I played up against me, will you? Promise a dying man you won't do that."

"I promise you, Bracer."

"Good! That makes me easier. Now tell me what they did to Pellingham."

"He was sent to prison and dishonorably discharged."

"Poor Pelly! I reckon I kind of dragged him down. If you ever meet him, tell him I was sorry for him. I don't blame nobody but myself. I was always a wild blade, and my mother told me I would end up in prison, or something like that. That's how I came to leave her — after we had a quarrel and I knocked her down. Oh, I wish, I wish I hadn't struck her!" He gave something like a sob. "Poor mother!" And then he broke down utterly.

Dan did what he could to comfort the man, and remained with him for over an hour, when he was ordered out on the picket-line. When he left he carried a slip of paper received from Bracer, giving the address of a hostelry in the City of Mexico at which Badillo had promised to meet Bracer sometime in the near future, if the issue of the military campaign allowed. The deserter died at sunrise on the following morning.

"It's a terrible way to die," said Dan to Ralph. "What a misspent life!"

"If his mother is alive she will be glad to learn that he repented," answered the younger Radbury. "But, Dan, do you think we can trace Juan the Giant by that slip of paper?"

"Perhaps, although I am inclined to believe it won't help us much. If the giant really had a hundred dollars of Bracer's money, he would most likely keep out of the way of the fellow."

As said before, the army under Scott was flushed with victory, and many were in favor of going ahead instantly and storming the very city itself. But the able leader counselled caution. He did not wish to spoil his series of victories by any error. Yet he knew the value of striking while the iron was hot.

While General Scott was strengthening his position on all sides of the doomed city, word came from Washington that negotiations for peace should again be held with the Mexican government. Santa Anna was all too willing to agree to an armistice, for this would give him time in which to reorganize his shattered forces, obtain much-needed ammunition, and do many other things which seemed necessary. The Mexicans in the City of Mexico numbered over two hundred thousand, and were patriotic to the core. They willingly gave up some of their largest church bells, and these were hastily cast into cannon. Drafting went on constantly, and by this means Santa Anna raised many more soldiers. To this body were added many private citizens who did not wish for

war at all, but who were dragged into it by the political leaders.

The negotiations lasted about two weeks, during which time our young soldiers had but little to do outside of serving on the picket-line. A rainy spell was on, and at times the water came down in torrents, accompanied by a fierce wind which, at night, chilled them to the bone. Yet during the middle of the day it was usually very warm and at times exceedingly hot. Such is the changeable weather in the mountains surrounding the capital of our sister republic.

"Wall, this is like gittin' a wolf down on his back an' holdin' him thar!" growled Poke, one day. "Why don't the general finish the job, I wonder?"

"He has to obey orders from Washington, I reckon," said Ralph. "It would be a strange thing if the Mexicans gave in without another fight, wouldn't it?"

"I don't believe they will give in," put in Dan. "Santa Anna is too hot-headed. It will be a good job done when he is turned out of office. Mexico will never have any peace while he is around."

At last General Scott discovered what the Mexicans were doing, and fearful now for his own safety, he sent word that they must make up their

minds as to what they wished to do, otherwise he would begin bombarding the city the next day. Then the answer came back that the Mexicans would surrender nothing.

"It's war to the finish!" cried Dan, when the news was circulated. "Now I rather think we'll see some tall fighting."

The answer from Santa Anna came in on September 7th, and General Scott lost no time in moving upon the enemy. He had learned that the western side of the capital was less strongly fortified than the south side, and now moved in the former direction.

This brought our army in contact with three fortified positions of the enemy: El Molino del Ray (The King's Mill), La Casa Mata, and Chapultepec, the last named a rocky height upon which rested a castle-like fortification.

The King's Mill was the first stronghold to be attacked. General Worth's division went to the front, and with this went the commands to which Ralph, Dan, and the old frontiersman were attached. At first a number of twenty-four pounders opened on the fort, followed by an advance of our batteries, and then began a general assault which was fierce in the extreme.

"Forward, boys!" came the cry. "Forward!"

And then some old Texan would add: "Shoot 'em down to a man! Remember the Alamo! *Remember the Alamo!*" That bloody contest, described in the first book of this series, "For the Liberty of Texas," was never to be forgotten by them.

Once again Ralph and Dan found themselves in the storm of battle, and right well did they acquit themselves. Shot and shell were hurled on every side, and in spots the very ground was torn up to a depth of two and three feet. Bullets whistled unpleasantly close, and Ralph received a painful, but not serious nip in the left shoulder while in the final assault. Dan had his face slightly burnt by some powder from a gun which was discharged within a few feet of him.

But victory was in the hands of the United States troops, and soon the Mexicans were running in the direction of the capital, taking whatever they could carry with them.

In the meantime other of our troops had advanced in the direction of La Casa Mata. This was an exceedingly strong fortress, and for some time it looked as if it would withstand every assault made upon it, and the Americans were driven back time and again. But with the fall of The King's Mill more troops were turned in the direction of La Casa Mata. Every available cannon

was trained on the fortress, and in such a manner that to send succor from the city itself would have proven suicidal. Hemmed in and subjected to a fierce cannonading, La Casa Mata at last surrendered.

The battle had started at dawn, and at nine o'clock in the morning it was over. Only four thousand of our troops had taken part, while the Mexicans numbered ten thousand. In killed and wounded we lost about eight hundred men, or one in five. By this my young readers can see what really bloody battles these contests were. The Mexican loss was much larger than our own.

Many of the soldiers and officers were for moving directly on the city, but again General Scott called a halt, and during the night of September 11th he constructed three batteries within reach of Chapultepec, and the next day the castle on the heights was vigorously bombarded. The Mexicans returned the fire, but with little effect.

"We are going to storm the castle!" was the cry that went the rounds, and it proved true. Everything was arranged carefully, and at sunrise the next day the bombardment was renewed with increased vigor. But at eight o'clock the batteries stopped firing and the advance was led by General Pillow's division, the daring troops rushing up the

steep sides of the hill in the face of a very storm of bullets. The soldiers carried with them long scaling-ladders, which were quickly placed against the walls of the castle, and into the fortification swarmed our men, regardless of the efforts made by the Mexicans to keep them out.

In this assault Dan and Poke were ordered forward with the rest, while Ralph marched by another route — the causeway and aqueduct of San Cosmé — toward the city itself.

"Up ye go!" cried Poke, when the ladder was placed against the high wall, and up went Dan to the top, with Poke not far below him, and others following.

Dan's head came over the wall, when three Mexicans discovered the ladder. With a howl of rage one of the Mexicans leaped forward and caught hold of the top of the ladder. The others followed, and all three gave both Dan and his foothold a vigorous shove, intending to hurl both backward to the bottom of the high hill.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FALL OF THE CITY — CONCLUSION

For the moment it looked as if Dan and his companions would be thrown to their death on the jagged rocks at the foot of Chapultepec hill.

But the young soldier had his wits about him, and, what was more to the point, had his gun in one hand ready for use.

As the leading Mexican came at him, he raised the gun slightly with one hand, and let drive.

The shot struck the Mexican full in the face, and down he went with a yell, probably the last sound he ever made on earth.

Then the ladder began to slide sideways, and all had to look where they were going. But it did not go far, for Poke, who had a rope and hook in his hands, threw the hook upward, and stayed its progress.

By this time others were pouring into the fort from each side of our friends, and the Mexicans were hurled backward, while large numbers were

shot down. Soon the ladder was again in position, and up they went with a rush, and did their full share toward driving the Mexicans out.

It was a hard-fought battle, and one which Dan never forgot. In the contest, Poke was severely wounded in the side, so that, from that day on, the gallant frontiersman never felt as strong and sturdy as formerly. He fell, and it was Dan who saw to it that he was carried out of the mêlée, and cared for with all tenderness.

The Mexicans had mined the fort, intending, if necessary, to blow the stronghold up. But so rapidly did our troops enter, this plan was frustrated, our soldiers shooting down the enemy just as the matches were about to be applied. General Bravo did his best to save the fort, but this was utterly impossible, and, in the end, he and his soldiers — or what was left of them — had to surrender.

Along the aqueduct the troops under General Worth had no easy time of it, and, as soon as the highway was gained, the soldiers sustained a fierce assault from housetops and other points of vantage. But they fought onward, Ralph with the rest, and soon Worth established himself in a position from which the Mexicans found it impossible to drive him.

Santa Anna now realized that the end was at hand, and that he could not make good his boast that no United States invader should ever drive him from the capital of his beloved country. He immediately made preparations to depart with his soldiers, and the retreat began at midnight. Before going, this wily general released all the convicts in the prisons, so as to give our troops as much trouble as possible when the city should fall into their hands.

As soon as Santa Anna had deserted the city, a committee waited upon General Scott to arrange terms of capitulation. But they wanted too much in their favor, and our commander would not agree, and sent forward the troops, under Generals Worth and Quitman, to move into the capital proper without delay. In this forward movement, General Worth was halted at the Alameda, several squares from the Plaza, or grand square, but General Quitman was allowed the honor of marching to the grand palace, where he hoisted the stars and stripes.

"That's the end of this war," said Ralph, when the news was circulated that our flag floated from the Mexican government building. "General Santa Anna will never recover from this blow." And he was right, although several engagements of minor importance occurred later on.

As mentioned previously, Santa Anna had liberated the convicts of the city prisons, and these now undertook to shoot down persons and steal whenever the opportunity offered. As soon as General Scott marched into the place, he set to work to restore peace and order, and in this the better class of citizens aided him. The convicts were hunted vigorously, martial law was proclaimed, and soon a peace was restored which the Mexicans had not known for years.

The work of bringing the convicts to justice was dangerous, if not full of glory, yet our young soldiers did not shirk from whatever duty in this regard they were called upon to do. In this service the commands to which Dan and Ralph were attached were united, so the brothers saw a good deal of each other.

"And now, what about Juan the Giant and Jose Toletto?" questioned Ralph, one afternoon.

"I am going to look for them to-morrow," answered Dan. "Our captain has offered me the assistance of a squad of men for that purpose."

Ralph immediately applied for and obtained permission to go along, and the hunt for the evil-doers began after breakfast on the day following.

For several hours nothing could be learned concerning either of the men, but, in this search, Dan ran across Stella Plassa, the sister of the Mexican who had been murdered in the hut. He found her much excited over the military situation. She had already heard of the murder of her brother, and, when told that Juan Badillo was guilty, grew furious.

"Yes, yes, we must catch him by all means," she said, in Spanish. "I shall not rest easy until justice has been done me."

She knew the neighborhood mentioned on the slip of paper given to Dan by Jack Bracer, and willingly guided the soldiers to it. There was a dirty-looking hotel, and next to it an old building used as a second-rate horse market.

As they approached the hotel, they saw two men come forth and enter the open doorway of the horse market. One of the individuals was Juan Badillo.

"The giant!" cried Dan, and immediately motioned the men behind him to halt. Then he took the men around a corner of the building.

"I want to surprise that rascal if I can," he said, to one of the soldiers. "Wait here until I whistle or you hear a pistol-shot. Mason, you can come along. You understand Spanish."

This was agreed upon, and, taking Ralph and Mason with him, Dan walked cautiously into the horse market by a side door.

The place was almost deserted, and nobody noticed the entrance of the two Radburys and Mason. The place was divided into numerous compartments, and by listening closely they heard Juan the Giant and his companion talking in a low tone of voice in a room not far off. They tiptoed their way in that direction.

"What did you want to bring me here for, Toletto?" they heard Badillo ask.

"Because there are too many eavesdroppers in the hotel," was the answer from Jose Toletto, for the second individual was indeed Inez Morales's miserly uncle and guardian.

"I'd rather stay where I could have a drink," growled the giant.

"I shall not keep you long," went on Jose Toletto. "I have a plan whereby you can make some money, and that quickly."

"Then let me have the plan by all means."

"I want you to go to the city hall with me and swear to certain papers. Do that and I will give you five hundred dollars."

"What do you want me to swear to?"

"To papers which state that my niece, Inez

Morales, wilfully drowned herself in the Rio Grande River."

"Ha! so you must have such a paper, and sworn to, before you can get her money," cried Juan the Giant, craftily.

"It will make it easier for me, that is all."

"But if the girl isn't dead —"

"She is dead, no doubt of that, Badillo. I saw her drown myself."

"Five hundred dollars is not enough. Make it double that and I will sign the papers."

There was some haggling, and finally Jose Toletto consented to give Badillo the price he demanded.

"What are they saying?" whispered Dan to Mason, and in a few words the soldier who understood Spanish explained.

"By his own talk Jose Toletto has exposed himself," said Dan, with a smile. "He has proved that he is unfit to be Inez Morales's guardian, even if it isn't proven that he ought to be in jail. Ralph, I reckon we had better capture them."

"Just what I say," returned the younger Radbury.

Mason was ordered to return to the soldiers and see that the horse market was surrounded. Then

he came back, bringing the biggest men of the squad with him.

When confronted by the Radburys and their friends, Juan the Giant was almost struck dumb.

"You! you!" he faltered, and for the moment could say no more.

"Yes, Badillo, and you can consider yourself a prisoner," replied Dan, coolly, and covered the giant with his gun, while Mason covered Jose Toletto.

"What does this mean?" asked Inez Morales's guardian, turning deathly pale.

"It means you are also under arrest," said Mason, in Spanish.

"But I have done nothing," insisted Jose Toletto, but his voice shook so he could scarcely frame the words.

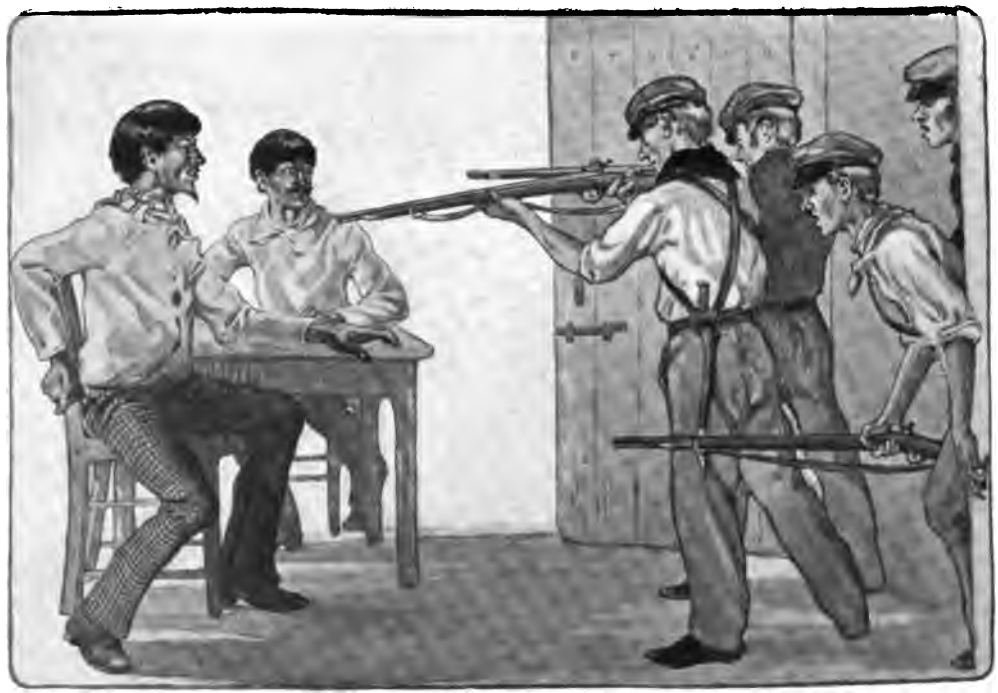
"This man has something to say about that," said Mason, and nodded toward Dan.

"But he is a stranger to me."

"He is no stranger to Inez Morales, your niece. He is her friend and is here in her interests," went on Mason, who had heard a portion of Dan's story.

"She — she — is dead."

"Not a bit of it. She is as well as you are — and likely to hold on to her money for a good many years to come."



JUAN THE GIANT AND TOLETTO CAPTURED

"I won't be taken!" came suddenly from Juan the Giant, and leaping forward, he dashed Dan's gun aside, so that the bullet merely grazed his arm. Then in a twinkle he leaped for the open doorway and started to run across the street.

"After him! shoot him!" came from both Dan and Ralph, and in a moment more three gunshots rang out, and Juan the Giant fell to the pavement, with a bullet in his arm and two bullets in his legs. When he was picked up he was groaning dismally, and the fight had gone out of him completely.

Jose Toletto was too much of a coward to resist, and fell on his knees in his plea for mercy. He was placed under arrest and marched to the the soldiers' headquarters, while an ambulance was ordered up to take Juan Badillo to the hospital. The giant remained at the hospital for many months, and when he did come forth it was to be tried and sent to a Mexican prison a terrible cripple, with one arm and one leg missing.

When placed under a close cross-examination, Jose Toletto broke down utterly and had to confess how he had treated Inez Morales, and how he had plotted to make her inheritance his own. He wanted to continue as her guardian, and promised to do better in the future, but no one

in court would listen to this, and in the end he was made to resign and give a strict accounting of every dollar which had passed through his hands. For a new guardian Inez Morales chose Señor Ramon, with whom she was still stopping, and he proved to be as kind and honorable as one would desire.

The laying low of Juan the Giant was a satisfaction to Stella Plassa, and she smiled grimly to herself when she learned that he had not been executed, but that he was to spend twenty years in prison instead. "As such a cripple he can get nothing out of life," she said. "Let the wretch live and grow sour. I am satisfied." But Juan the Giant was getting old, and the crippling had made him very feeble, and he died in prison while he had still eight years to serve.

When caught, Juan the Giant had a little over three hundred dollars on his person. Part of this went to Stella Plassa for payment on the horse the rascal had stolen from her brother, part went to Jack Bracer's estate, and was later on forwarded to Mrs. Bracer, who still lived in New Orleans, and the remainder came to the Radburys. When Dan sent Mrs. Bracer her money, he did not forget to forward with it a long letter, telling how her son Jack had died and what he had said, and this

proved as much of a comfort to the old woman as did the money.

"Well, the war seems to be over, and we have likewise finished up with our enemies," said Ralph one day. "For my part I would like to go home."

"And I am with you," answered Dan, readily. "I have seen enough of fighting for the present. I'd just as leave do a little ploughing, or ride over the cattle range."

"Or take it easy by the fireside," put in Poke, whom they were visiting in the hospital. "Yes, the war is over, and General Scott has won, and now let us all go home, say I."

A few words more and I will bring to a finish this tale of military adventures while fighting "Under Scott in Mexico."

The war was indeed over, and with the fall of the City of Mexico the Mexican authorities were more than willing to sue for peace, and upon our terms. There was a gala time in all of our States when peace was at last announced, and cannons boomed, bells rang, and bonfires blazed broadly everywhere. By the terms of peace Mexico not only gave up her hold on Texas, but likewise all of her interests in New Mexico and Lower California. About this time gold was discovered in

California, and then began the grand rush to the gold fields, and California was speedily transformed from little better than a wilderness into a rich and populous State.

While in the City of Mexico the Radburys received several letters from home which made them more than anxious to get away. At last they were mustered out of the service, and with Poke, started on their journey for home, first, however, bidding all of their army friends an affectionate farewell.

At the ranch they received a royal welcome, not only from their father, but also from the Fieldings and numerous others who had gathered to do them honor. Oliver Fielding had entirely recovered the use of his eyes, and the celebration the boys held was one long to be remembered. Stories had to be told and retold many times. Amos Radbury was highly pleased.

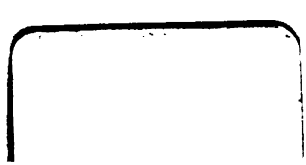
"Boys, you have both done our name credit," said he. "I am proud of you."

And here I will skip over a few years. After the excitement was over, Ralph and Dan settled down to work on the ranch in earnest, and by the advice of their father they added five hundred acres of ground to the range, which Mr. Radbury deeded jointly to both of them. Dan began a

regular correspondence with Inez Morales, and soon this ripened into more than friendship, with the result that the young ranchman journeyed to Mexico one spring and returned with Inez as his bride. In the meantime Ralph had not forgotten his old-time friend Alice Fielding, and two years later the pair were married at the Fielding homestead, so that Ollie became Ralph's brother-in-law.

"And he is just the fellow I wanted," said Ollie. "He's the best chum in the world."

"The Radburys are all right," said Poke, who was now living with them, having settled down to take it easy in his old age. "The best boys in Texas, barring none!"

And here let us leave all of our friends and say good-by.

THE END.